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FEATURE ARTICLE

The Challenges of Explosive Detection

How terrorists innovate to circumvent airline security measures

ROBERT LISCOUSKI AND WILLIAM McGANN

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

Brigadier General Donald C. Bolduc

COMMANDER, SPECIAL OPERATIONS
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FROM THE EDITOR

The crash of EgyptAir Flight 804 under yet-to-be explained circumstances has refocused attention on aviation security. Our cover story this month, which we commissioned after a bomb hidden in a laptop was detonated onboard a Somali passenger jet in February, focuses on the technological arms race between terrorist bomb makers and those working to prevent bombs from getting onto planes. Robert Liscouski and William McGann, two leading specialists in aviation security and explosives detection, identify lagging security at airports in the developing world as the Achilles' heel of the global aviation system. In our interview Brigadier General Donald Bolduc, who leads Special Operations Command Africa, explains how U.S. Special Forces have acted as a counterterrorism "force multiplier" for partnered African countries.

Magnus Ranstorp examines how Islamic State recruits from Europe are raising significant funds through microfinance techniques within the European Union and transferring the proceeds to the Islamic State. With the very recent death of Taliban emir Mullah Mansoor in a U.S. airstrike, Tore Hamming and Olivier Roy weigh the costs and benefits to al-Qa`ida of al-Zawahiri's *bay`a* to Mansoor last summer, arguing that the strengthening fortunes of the Taliban and al-Zawahiri's need for allies to confront the Islamic State make it likely he will also subordinate himself to newly appointed Taliban leader Mullah Haibatullah Akhunzada. As the world watches to see if an internationally backed Government of National Accord in Libya can establish itself and take on the Islamic State and other terrorist groups present there, Andrew McGregor examines how security in southern Libya might be impacted if international powers decide to intervene militarily. Finally, Animesh Roul outlines how Bangladesh has increasingly become fertile ground for al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State with both groups taking advantage of an upsurge in Islamist militancy to expand their presence and to build alliances with local jihadist groups.

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Cover: Daallo Airlines' damaged Airbus 321 sits on a runway at Mogadishu's airport on February 2, 2016, after a failed attempt to down the plane.

AP

The Evolving Challenges for Explosive Detection in the Aviation Sector and Beyond

By Robert Liscouski and William McGann

The mid-air bombing of a Somali passenger jet in February was a wake-up call for security agencies and those working in the field of explosive detection. It was also a reminder that terrorist groups from Yemen to Syria to East Africa continue to explore innovative ways to get bombs onto passenger jets by trying to beat detection systems or recruit insiders. The layered state-of-the-art detection systems that are now in place at most airports in the developed world make it very hard for terrorists to sneak bombs onto planes, but the international aviation sector remains vulnerable because many airports in the developing world either have not deployed these technologies or have not provided rigorous training for operators. Technologies and security measures will need to improve to stay one step ahead of innovative terrorists. Given the pattern of recent Islamic State attacks, there is a strong argument for extending state-of-the-art explosive detection systems beyond the aviation sector to locations such as sports arenas and music venues.

On February 2, 2016, two workers at Mogadishu's international airport passed through security after placing a laptop^a on the screening belt at an X-ray checkpoint. Their colleagues manning the X-ray machine had no idea the men had been recruited by the terrorist group al-Shabaab, and they failed to detect the ex-

plosive device hidden inside the laptop. Once safely through to the boarding gates at the terminal, the terrorist operatives handed the laptop to a Somali accomplice named Abdullahi Abdisalam Borleh who had been rerouted onto Daallo Airlines Flight 159 to Djibouti at the last minute after the Turkish airlines flight he was meant to take was canceled. Twenty minutes into the flight, the laptop exploded, blowing a large hole in the fuselage. Borleh was sucked out of the plane. Only the fact that the plane had yet to reach cruising altitude, and thus a high pressure differential between the air inside the cabin and outside, likely saved the lives of the more than 70 passengers on board. The pilots were able to make an emergency landing back at the airport.¹

But the attack on Daallo Airlines Flight 159 set off alarm bells within the U.S. aviation security community because it demonstrated terrorists' continued determination to use complex methods to attack passenger jets. A source close to the investigation told CNN the laptop bomb was "sophisticated."² Security agencies have been particularly attuned to the threat of terrorists concealing explosives in laptops or other electronics ever since 2014 when intelligence indicated al-Qa'ida's Khorasan outfit in Syria was developing these techniques,^b so al-Shabaab's success in sneaking a device onboard a passenger jet was especially alarming. Coming just months after an EgyptAir mechanic allegedly helped smuggle a bomb onboard Metrojet Flight 9268 at Sharm el-Sheikh airport killing 224, it also compounded concerns about the "insider threat" at airports.³ One line of inquiry for investigators in the Somali plane bomb attack should be whether the two Mogadishu airport workers received less scrutiny by the security staff operating the X-ray machines.⁴

This article examines the high-stakes contest between terrorists developing new techniques to try to beat airport security and the security officials and technologists working to keep bombs off planes. Ever since the al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) operative Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the so-called "underwear bomber," came close to blowing up Northwest Airlines Flight 253 over Detroit with a PETN explosive device built by the skillful Saudi bomb maker Ibrahim al-Asiri, there has been heightened concern about the terrorist threat to passenger jets as well as the development and proliferation of advanced bomb-making techniques. But despite a media narrative of terrorists developing "undetectable bombs," this article will explain why from a technological point of view it is very difficult to beat the latest generation of machines and scanners, including explosive trace detection (ETD), especially when these are combined as part of a "layered" approach to security.

^a U.S. government sources confirmed to the authors in April 2016 that the device was concealed in a laptop.

Robert Liscouski has more than 30 years of experience as a senior government official, business leader, entrepreneur, special agent, and law enforcement officer. In 2003, he was appointed by President George W. Bush as the first Assistant Secretary for Infrastructure Protection at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. He currently serves as president of Implant Sciences Corporation, an American company developing explosive detection equipment.

Dr. William McGann is the chief executive officer of Implant Sciences Corporation. He was one of the original developers of commercial ion mobility spectrometry technology for explosives trace detection (ETD), and he has authored over 70 research proposals to the U.S. government, 20-plus scientific publications, and over 25 patents in the areas of nuclear, chemical, and biological detection technologies.

^b In the summer of 2014 the TSA mandated new measures at certain overseas airports with flights to the United States to protect against explosives being concealed in electronics after intelligence suggested the so-called Khorasan group in Syria was developing such techniques. See "Aviation Official: Khorasan Group a threat to flights," Associated Press, September 27, 2014.

The largest vulnerability facing the global aviation sector today is not master bomb makers beating current detection systems, but rather it comes from two sources. The first is the many airports in the developing world that lag in deploying state-of-the-art machines, rigorous training, and best practices. The second is the opportunity for terrorist groups to recruit airport insiders in both the developed and developing worlds who either are likely to receive less scrutiny from fellow airport staff at security checkpoints than passengers or can evade screening altogether.

Lastly, this article will make the point that terrorists are not just targeting planes. For years, mass transit, arenas, and other large-capacity areas have also been targets. The uptick in plots and attacks in Europe by the Islamic State against targets of opportunity such as a soccer stadium and a music venue underline the need for a broader deployment of explosives detection systems.

Innovations in Terrorist Bomb-Making

From the first-known terrorist bombing of a civilian aircraft, terrorist groups have continued to innovate their methods in order to perpetrate attacks against civilian aircraft and the aviation sector to achieve their goals. The past six months alone have seen attacks on a Russian airliner, a Somali airliner, and the Brussels airport attack in March. A subsequent attempt to bomb an airliner one month after the Daallo Airlines attack was thwarted when a laptop device exploded at a security checkpoint at another Somali airport.⁵

The most innovative bomb maker to emerge in recent years is the Saudi AQAP operative Ibrahim al-Asiri, who last summer declared that hitting the United States remained a priority.⁶ In October 2010 he constructed a very difficult-to-detect IED using printer cartridges to conceal 400 grams of PETN that were timed to go off mid-flight on two U.S.-bound cargo aircraft. The devices were found as a result of an intelligence operation, not as a result of security screening, raising significant concerns about terrorists' capabilities to evade sophisticated security countermeasures. Police initially had failed to find one of the devices at East Midlands Airport in the U.K. despite using sniffer dogs and passing the printer through an X-ray.⁷ Al-Asiri is also believed to have been behind another plot to bomb a U.S.-bound plane, which was thwarted in April 2012 because the suicide bomber selected for the operation was a double agent working for Saudi and British intelligence. The device recovered by the agent and taken to the United States for forensic examination featured several enhancements to the under-wear device deployed above Detroit three years earlier.⁸

In 2012 Western intelligence agencies developed information that AQAP was pioneering techniques to surgically implant devices inside potential bombers.⁹ TSA took this threat seriously, especially because in 2009 al-Asiri had implanted a bomb in the rectum of his brother in an attack against then-Saudi Arabian counterterrorism chief Prince Muhammad bin Nayef. It is thought that the Advanced Imaging Technology (AIT) machines would detect anomalies for parts of the device needed to detonate a bomb that is surgically implanted, and there are other indications such as obvious signs of recent incisions. This mode of attack poses a particular threat in sectors outside aviation in which AIT machines are not in use, particularly for high-profile individuals as the bin Nayef attack demonstrated. In 2014 intelligence emerged that al-Asiri and his team of bomb makers have continued to do research and development on explosive devices including shoe bombs.¹⁰

Proliferation

For several years there has been concern that al-Asiri has shared his bomb-making prowess with a cadre of apprentices within AQAP. Western intelligence agencies also believe AQAP has transferred key technology to al-Qa'ida elements in Syria. A series of airstrikes weakened the capabilities of the so-called Khorasan group after intelligence emerged in 2014 that it was plotting attacks on Western aviation by hiding devices in electronics such as cell phones and laptops.¹¹

Terrorist groups have also attempted to share techniques with a broader jihadist audience. In late 2014 AQAP's Inspire magazine published detailed instructions on how to manufacture and conceal "non-metallic" explosives to target passenger planes. Their logic was that if enough supporters built such devices, some would get through security. While the instructions on their own may not lead to the construction of a viable device, it does point to their intent to inspire actions that disrupt and terrorize.¹²

Advances in Bomb Detection

Three decades after Pan Am Flight 103 was blown up over Lockerbie, Scotland, bomb detection technologies and systems have grown much more effective. Major airports in North America, Europe, and other parts of the developed world now have multi-layered screening processes for travelers and their checked and carry-on luggage. The most commonly deployed explosives detection systems are walk-through metal detectors, AIT (or body scanners), multi-view X-ray machines used in conjunction with explosives trace detection (ETD) systems, and canine teams.

When you enter security at a major airport in North America, Europe, and other parts of the developed world you now go through a multi-tiered screening process. When you put your bags on an X-ray belt you are putting them on what is called in the jargon an EDS (explosive detection system). State-of-the-art systems now involve advanced high-definition or multi-view X-ray machines. These are essentially CT scans that use computerized tomography (imaging by penetrating objects with electromagnetic waves) to measure the physical characteristics of items in bags. It sets off an alarm when it detects objects that exhibit the physical characteristics of explosives.

Most air travelers in the developed world will be familiar with ETD systems. These highly sensitive systems can detect minute (nano-gram level) explosive trace and involve a security screener taking a swab of a surface of an object or your clothing and putting it inside the ETD machine, which analyzes trace materials through an ionization process.¹³

While body scanners, canines, and X-rays have some level of intuitive understanding associated with them, ETD technologies are largely not well understood in the physical security community at large. This is primarily due to the fact that these systems operate by sampling invisible trace amounts of material (at unimaginably low levels described in terms like nanograms and picograms) and detecting them uniquely by their specific molecular properties. These molecular separation and detection mechanisms are far less intuitive than X-ray imaging systems or the concept of using the "trained nose" of a dog to search out concealed explosives.

Molecular-based ETDs are the only systems of the aforementioned actually capable of uniquely detecting and identifying explosives. One of the greatest fallacies in explosives detection is that dogs and standard X-rays detect explosives when, in fact, they

simply detect anomalies or objects that are out of place. X-rays basically identify objects inside a package or bag that have a particular density or mass compared to what is typically expected in a non-threat scenario. This is not specific detection nor is it chemical identification. The X-ray systems used for passenger baggage screening use X-rays that are capable of penetrating the surface of a bag and revealing an image of the contents inside. The energy of these X-rays are specified to create a balance between ability to penetrate and to provide contrast in the resulting image based on the densities of objects inside. Basic systems sometimes referred to as single view provide a “flat image” of the bag contents with contrast between objects based on their density. More sophisticated systems used multiple views to create pseudo-3D imagery, which assists the operator in recognition of potential threat objects. The ultimate 3D X-ray imaging systems use a computed tomography (CT) approach, where full 3D reconstructed images of the bag contents are produced and the performance is optimized by the system’s ability to measure the density within specific volume elements of a bag.

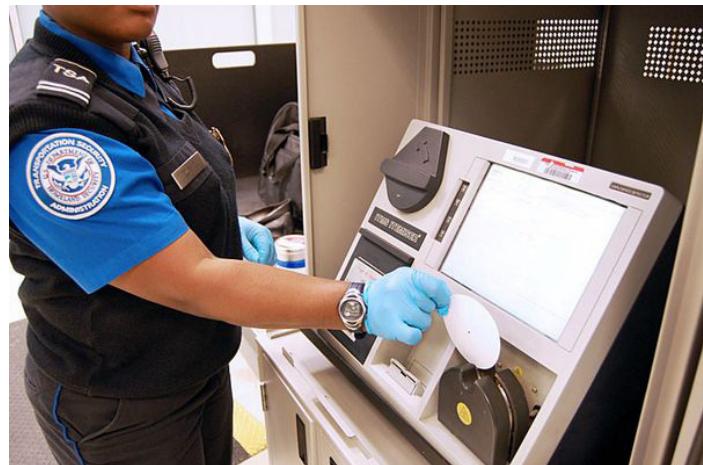
Perhaps the ultimate technology enhancement to any of these X-ray methods is to employ dual-energy X-rays to further enhance material specificity. The concept is that using a high-energy X-ray source reveals density and simultaneously a lower-energy source is used to provide an indication of whether the object is made from organic or inorganic materials. While this approach has good technical merit, it is not capable of providing material specificity to the level of other techniques such as X-ray diffraction. Ultimately, EDS systems using sophisticated CT technologies will improve by increasing the image resolution and maximizing the energy resolution by using multiple sources.

Body scanners, for their part in the security equation, only allow operators to detect anomalies under the clothing of those being scanned. Their advantage over metal detectors is they can detect nonmetallic objects. The principles of the underlying technology use a non-penetrating radiation that literally reflects off the body and the resulting reflected signal provides an image contrast of any objects concealed beneath the clothing. The image resolution is such that discrete-sized objects are readily made visible in their contrast, but the resolution is not sufficient to create privacy concerns. This technology offers a good balance between anomaly detection and privacy.

Similarly, canines are trained to identify explosives in their compound forms, not pure materials. Typically, the canines will train to the more volatile scents that emanate from the mixture such as solvents, binders, and plasticizers, which are used in the formulation mixture of an explosive but in and of themselves are not explosives. Most pure explosives materials do not emit vapor or scent in high enough concentrations to be detected by canines. They can be quite effective, however, at detecting a mixture of odors that are often related to the presence of an explosives threat, and typically this is the mechanism by which they are deemed effective. They are effectively presumptive rather than confirmatory tests.

Explosive Trace Detection

The most commonly deployed ETD systems today are based on a method of separation and detection known as ion mobility spectrometers (IMS). The detection science behind ETD invokes the use of fundamental chemistry and physics to separate and identify targeted threats at a molecular level. The molecular specificity is driven by the size and shape of the target molecules. Chemical ex-



An Explosive Trace Detection (ETD) system

plosives have a wide range of molecular properties that govern their size and shape at a molecular level and ETD technologies exploit these known differences.

When a sample is introduced into the ETD, it is immediately vaporized and ionized by the system. These resulting molecular ions are subsequently separated in chambers where specific voltages are used to cause the different molecular species to move and separate at different speeds according to their size and shape, resulting in characteristic spectra for each targeted substance. A critical aspect of successful deployment of ETD technology is in the training of the operators in the proper methods to acquire samples for passengers and baggage. Once proper training is in place and maintained, ETDs become a powerful workhorse technology on the frontlines of explosives detection.

Detection systems that are based on IMS have several distinct advantages. They operate in our ambient environment and are readily deployable in robust packages (both desktop and hand-held configurations) to suit the intended application. Most typically, these type of systems are seen in operation at airport checkpoints, which is where the technology was first widely deployed in the mid-to late 1990s following the Pan Am disaster over Lockerbie. In that incident, the plane was brought down by an electronic device containing a relatively small amount of plasticized explosive known as Semtex H.¹⁴ Since that time, the threats have become quite diverse in both their chemical and physical forms, and IMS-based ETDs have done extremely well in keeping pace with the ever-growing list of threats, including the new homemade explosives, or HMEs. One such explosive, TATP (tri-acetone-tri-peroxide) is extremely powerful and relatively simple (but dangerous) to transform into an IED. This particular explosives threat has been widely talked about in the media given its use in the recent bombings in France and Belgium. It has been used widely in the Middle East and in Israel since the mid-1990s.

Another misnomer propagated largely in the press is that these type of explosives threats are not detectable with currently deployed technologies. This is false. The latest generation ETDs, when used in combination with the latest X-ray technologies, are generally excellent at detecting TNT, plasticized explosives such as C-4, PETN (Detasheet), and Semtex. This powerful combination of technologies should catch these explosives threats, even if it were concealed in the electronics of a laptop, because ETD swabs can detect minute amounts of residue.¹⁵

When modern, multi-view X-ray systems are used alone there is a chance the clutter in the X-ray image caused by the laptop could lead operators to overlook flagged anomalies. Single-view X-rays, on the other hand, would be utterly reliant on a very vigilant screener at best. And TNT concealed in a laptop could be easily missed.¹⁶

In terms of the latest and most widely talked about threat of TATP, current ETD technologies have been capable of detecting trace levels of this threat since the 1990s and is included in the detection standards requirements used by all certifying bodies around the world.^c

Despite the continuous technology developments and enhancements to the current set of explosives detection technologies, terrorist organizations also raise the bar on detection through their own innovation processes. While it is generally true that new explosives formulations and IED construction is not carried out in pristine research laboratory environment, the efforts have been extremely fruitful nevertheless. The threats are rapidly changing in terms of explosive material advancements as well as concealment and IED packaging methods. These advancements have come about through fundamental understanding of both the strengths and weaknesses of current technologies, continuously raising the bar for those working in the field of explosive detection.

Several examples over the years have shown that terrorists will try to substitute explosives materials cast into powders or solids that mimic the average densities of the materials that they are replacing in an attempt to defeat X-ray detection. In the case of the printer cartridge bomb, the PETN explosive was in a powder form, taking on a similar effective X-ray cross-section as the normal toner material used.¹⁷ This would easily defeat an imaging device that simply measures density, even with multiple views. Similarly, on the trace detection side, more effective concealment methods to reduce and eliminate “detectable traces” of explosives are now more commonplace. While these individual technologies for detection continue to improve and meet the new threats that are emerging, it is a very asymmetric challenge, where propagation of new materials and methods outpaces detection technology evolution. One of the best ways to rebalance the threat evolution/detection technology challenge is to combine the powers of these individual technologies in such a way to exploit their maximum performance through

“With a fundamental knowledge of how these various technologies work, the most effective solution for explosives detection is to use each in its appropriate station in a layered approach to security.”

integration in a layered system.

Layered Security

With a fundamental knowledge of how these various technologies work, the ultimate and most effective solution for explosives detection is to use each of these technologies in its appropriate station in a layered approach to security. As individual technology platforms, X-rays, canines, and ETD sensors work very well at detecting most of the known threats in the current environment. The hysteria over new “undetectable devices” is not warranted. Current systems are, in general, very effective. When used in concert as a layered security system, they represent an even more robust solution to the current and foreseeable future threats.

To fully capture the power of layered technology deployments, the data streaming from the various sensors themselves could be “integrated” and fused into multidimensional threat detection and an action-based security decision-making system. While this is possible to do today, the explosives detection technology community has only just begun to design and implement such concepts and technologies. This will be a rapidly advancing part of future product developments as the industry leaders begin to come together and offer solutions that operate on more open platforms. In the meantime, implementing the possible with best available technologies at hand in a manually integrated fashion is still the best opportunity for rapidly responding to new and emerging threats. While no detection system now or in the future will ever be perfect, technologies are available and being developed to meet current and future threats.

Uneven Deployment of State-of-the-Art Systems

One of the largest unmet challenges is that the best available technologies such as those deployed in civil aviation in North America and Europe are not widely deployed in the rest of the world or in the new threat scenarios such as mass transit and public venues. The recent examples of air disasters in Mogadishu with Daallo Airlines and the Metrojet Flight 9268 out of Sharm el-Sheikh International Airport, along with the broader implementation of terrorist acts across Europe, suggest a real need to migrate best available technologies from secure checkpoints in aviation further out to “the edge” of the security network and to areas of the world where these technologies are not yet widely deployed with properly trained security personnel. Such a technology migration would also further drive new innovations in these core platform technologies to ensure that they continue to meet current and future threat scenarios.

c However, in some cases, driven by a desire to promote new and exciting ideas, otherwise credible university researchers will make claims that their new technology is uniquely capable of detecting such threats, implying weaknesses in the current technology base. In addition to being false, they miss the larger point—it is not good enough to have a specialized technology solution capable of specific detection of one or two types of explosives. Current systems that are tested and certified by governing bodies around the world such as TSA in the United States and similar agencies such as STAC in France and the DfT in the U.K. have strict trace detection standards that must be met for dozens of types and classes of explosives. Any ETD system under evaluation must be able to detect all of the threats, and therefore, exquisite detection performance for one substance does not constitute an effective or practical solution. However, because these standards are closely guarded for security reasons, they are typically not discussed openly. This void of information creates the unfortunate reality where other technologies (not certified) can make generalized “eureka” claims, which usually do little but confuse policymakers and regulators and frustrate the testing bodies that know better but cannot speak to the facts. The behavior, as well-intentioned as it may be to introduce new technology platforms, often has the opposite effect of creating a churn of non-productive activities within the agencies to answer to policymakers and regulators.

Training is Critical

There are multiple challenges that are continuously present in the aviation security sector but none more critical than consistent high performance of humans in the security chain. The human component as a vulnerability can be exploited either through incapable or poorly trained security staff or through corruption, direct intimidation (or extortion), or by placing an “agent” in the system that facilitates or directly attacks the system.

In congressional testimony in November, DHS Inspector General John Roth said the latest covert testing had identified human failure as a key vulnerability.¹⁸ While his testimony did not delve into the causes of human failure such as competency, poor hiring, lack of training, or corruption, it did highlight the high interdependency of humans, technology, and processes for the successful management of the aviation security system. Training and performance metrics are key to successful performance, particularly in a high-risk environment in which routines, boredom, and complacency are as big a threat as a terrorist exploiting the system.

Although TSA does not conduct passenger screening abroad, it requires airports that serve as the last point of departure to the United States meet stringent security standards. The bottom line is U.S. and European efforts to protect the traveling public are inextricably dependent on countries that have inadequate and inconsistent procedures due to lack of leadership, commitment, and/or technology. The TSA and ECAC have spent hundreds of millions of dollars (as has the private sector) to develop advanced and highly capable technologies to detect and prevent exactly these type of attacks.

Inconsistent standards in some parts of the world have compelled some U.S. carriers to purchase ETD equipment to augment screening prior to passengers boarding aircraft after passing through local security checks. This is a recognized gap in some regions of the world where security requirements are either lacking or sub-standard and a passenger or cargo threat can be placed on board an aircraft and then propagated through the aviation system to a high-value target well inside the secure zone. At the present time, this last point of departure approach to using gate checking with existing technologies to ensure that security standards are maintained from point of origin to final destination is a temporary and not very efficient approach, and it is necessary to close the gap. Many security agencies around the world have recognized this challenge and are working diligently to harmonize explosives detection requirements into a global standards regime.

Insider Threat

The lack of worldwide standards and implementation of best practices are compounded by the difficulty of detecting the “insider threat.” Insiders—people who have legitimate access to secure areas—can plant a bomb or assist a bomber in carrying out their mission. They include baggage handlers and service, security, and airline personnel, virtually anyone who has access to the airport. Insiders can be turned into terrorist recruits, pressured to cooperate through financial gain, extortion or threats, and they are difficult to detect. That is what is believed to have happened on the Russian airliner that took off from Sharm el-Sheikh last October and clearly that is what happened to enable the bomber to board the Daallo plane in February.

The United States is not immune to such threats. Inspector General Roth also testified about previous 2012 results from testing TSA’s Airport Access Control Systems and reported that they “identified significant access control vulnerabilities, meaning uncleared individuals could have unrestricted and unaccompanied access to the most vulnerable parts of the airport—the aircraft and checked baggage.”¹⁹ The OIG also reported last summer that tests of the screening system showed that 95 percent of attempts to smuggle weapons through U.S. checkpoints were successful.²⁰ Though the failures were again related mostly to human performance factors rather than criminal collusion, if this is the state of performance in the most advanced country in the world, then it highlights significant gaps in the airline security network worldwide.

Even the best technology cannot overcome incompetence let alone outright complicity with terrorists’ intent on thwarting security. Personnel that have access to airside services to perform their functions have to undergo screening similar to passengers, though, as the Inspector General’s report revealed, compliance with regulations and policies does not necessarily guarantee security.²¹

Conclusion

Security has always been a “people, process, and technology” business, and it appears more than ever that advanced technology needs to be applied uniformly across the entire global aviation sector, as well as other vulnerable sectors to detect evolving threats. While state-of-the-art technology is good at detecting explosives, the concern is that terrorist capabilities are challenging our technological capability to detect the latest threats.

U.S. government spending in the homeland security sector since September 2001 can be estimated easily at well over \$1 trillion. However, as much as is spent to prevent incidents, terrorist groups continue to innovate and modify their methods to attack their targets of choice. The past several years has seen an increase in attacks against hardened and soft targets in western countries as well as the continued threat against airline-related targets. The pace of the attacks seems to be increasing but so does the level of sophistication of the attacks themselves. While capabilities are evolving and gaining in sophistication, the use of those capabilities has become more widespread and less centrally controlled, creating a “commodified terrorism” model in which these new methods can be used by virtually any organized group or lone wolf actor. Terrorists have demonstrated their ability to adapt and innovate while we continue to take a methodical and studied approach to applying new technologies.

The reality of our current war on terrorism is that the costs are inversely correlated. Terrorists can use inexpensive but highly effective means to attack high-value and highly protected targets, forcing governments to take stricter and more costly measures to provide protection. Their model scales while ours becomes more difficult to sustain. Until we are successful in changing the paradigm in which cheap terrorism is effective terrorism, we need to be prepared to continue to invest in technologies and processes that make it more difficult for them to succeed. **CTC**

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A View from the CT Foxhole: Brigadier General Donald C. Bolduc, Commander, Special Operations Command Africa

By Brian Dodwell

Brigadier General Donald C. Bolduc has served as Commander, Special Operations Command Africa, since April 2015. His command assignments include Combined Forces Special Operations Component Command, Afghanistan; Combined Joint Special Operation Task Force - Afghanistan; 1st Battalion, 3rd Special Forces Group, Afghanistan; C Company, 2nd Battalion, 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne); and HHC, 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne). Prior to his current assignment, BG Bolduc served as the Deputy Director of Operations at U.S. Africa Command.

CTC: How important are Special Operations Forces (SOF) going to be in fight against the Islamic State? What can SOF achieve and what can't they achieve? What do Americans need to understand about this?

BG Bolduc: The SOCAFRICA team is integral to the overall fight against ISIS in Africa. As ISIS is a transnational terrorist organization, our contribution is part of a larger, worldwide effort to defeat this type of violent extremist organization (VEO) and their affiliates. But a SOF response cannot defeat ISIS without enablers, robust logistics, intelligence and airlift, host-nation forces, and international partners. So while SOCAFRICA's SOF capabilities might be what people think of first when combating ISIS or any other emerging threat group, there's an entire network of resources required to complete the mission.

Our SOF teams are only one part of a comprehensive approach to countering the threat of VEOs. We've got to work with State Department colleagues, USAID, non-governmental organizations, and other nations to put programs in place to stop the spread of violent extremism and devise ways to assist those in areas affected by ISIS after the threat is removed. The military is only part of the solution. Effective civil administration, protecting the populace, and improving development is the key to stability and defeating the violent extremist organizations.

It's important to note the role our Civil Military Support Elements (CMSE) and Military Information Support Operations (MISO) have in this fight. These SOF capabilities can disrupt enemy operations while buying space and time for partner forces and supported governments to make progress against ISIS. By focusing on local populations, CMSE and MISO teams are able to address the underlying conditions enabling terrorism, counter the VEO narrative, and build lasting bonds between citizens and legitimate governments.

SOF are a specialized but limited resource. As I mentioned, there's a lot of other resources needed to apply SOCAFRICA's SOF solutions. While SOF are capable of responding quickly to a cri-

sis, long-term success can only be achieved through a persistent presence, a presence requiring dozens of organizations to achieve results. Short-term gains against this enemy will be unsustainable without all of these elements working in concert.

CTC: What tools does the United States need to develop, or what capabilities do we need to improve to use SOF even more effectively as a tool to defeat terrorists?

BG Bolduc: Our military operates in the most complex environment in recent memory. Threats are global, mobile, and deadly. We're facing challenges on every front, so leaders have to make tough decisions on where to prioritize the finite number of people, equipment, and other resources our nation has to combat terrorist threats.

When operating in a fiscally constrained environment, as we are currently, getting all the resources and manpower you would like in order to accomplish your mission is often very difficult, if not impossible. As Special Operations Forces, we are a force multiplier, able to "fight above our weight class" by working through, with, and by our African partners to accomplish multi-national, counterterrorism objectives. However, many of our military's resources are currently in use outside of Africa. Understandably, SOF in Africa must compete for ISR [intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance] and airlift capabilities to support our operations. Without ISR, the ability to find and fix enemy positions is degraded. Given the size of the African continent, without robust airlift support, it can be extremely difficult to move forces to quickly respond to crises. That's not a complaint; it's simply the reality of working with a finite amount of resources to take on a problem set that's global in nature. Developing solutions to expand SOF ISR and airlift capacity with inexpensive, scalable systems will be vital to operations not just in Africa but worldwide.

We also need to develop predictive analysis tools to assist us in understanding and countering terrorist usage of the internet. Terrorists employ social media and web-based applications better and faster every day. These groups continue to adapt and change their tactics, reducing our ability to counter their messaging, recruitment, and communications. The development of predictive analysis tools would enhance our ability to proactively engage the enemy in the information environment. In other words, the ability to counter the enemy before they even speak (or post) would make SOF even more effective.

Lastly, power generation equipment and water purification systems able to operate on solar power or low power are always in demand. These types of solutions enable SOF teams to operate in remote areas for longer periods and are vital to sustaining partner nation forces who can't afford to install large, expensive systems. Inexpensive, easy-to-maintain items like these will always be in demand in Africa.

CTC: How effective have security assistance and advise-and-assist efforts been in Africa? What challenges have you encountered working with local forces?

BG Bolduc: Our security assistance and advise-and-assist efforts in Africa have been effective as we continue to see gradual improvements in the overall security capabilities of African partner nations across the continent. Clearly, there's been more progress in certain areas versus others, but the trends I see with these forces are positive. In the Lake Chad Basin, nations are coming together to fight Boko Haram; Mauritania recently stood up its own organic Civil Affairs element; in Central Africa, the African Union Regional Task Force has decimated the Lord's Resistance Army's ranks and ability to harass the population; police and first responders in West Africa are better able to work with governments to assist citizens during crisis—these are all positive developments our SOF cooperation with these countries has enabled.

Unfortunately, the enemy trend line is also going in the wrong direction. We've seen increasing interconnectedness between VEOs, greater use of social media, and alarming trends in recruitment. For every positive development one might cite, there's also a lot of work still to be done. That's what keeps my team of 1,700 SOCAFRICA personnel busy year-round in 22 partner nations. It's a challenge for us, but you've got to remember, our African counterparts are also committed to stopping these trends in their home countries. I often tell our team, "We're not at war in Africa, but our African partners are." That gives a sense of urgency to all we do. There's no time to waste.

One of the challenges we've had to overcome is a hesitation by some African partners, a sort of question about U.S. intentions. Everything we do is intended to build support, trust, and interoperability of Special Operations Forces from around the world to support regional solutions to the problems faced by our African partners. Unfortunately, given the United States' and Europe's track record of providing enduring support in Africa, combined with the history of colonial exploitation, some governments may have an inherent distrust of international efforts to support them. As a result, it often takes a considerable amount of time to cement these relationships, forge trust, and create interoperability in order to build effective teams and long-lasting partnerships. In countries where we have had the longest persistent presence, we've also seen the greatest improvements in trust and cooperation. Once we're working together as a cohesive team, we've seen rapid improvements in the capabilities of our partners.

Another challenge is that we often see a lack of commitment on the part of the civil governments in the countries where we operate. This is a significant challenge because we certainly do not wish to replace our partners' "will" with our own capability and capacity. We can assist these nations with the "how," but the will to tackle these wicked problems has to be their own. Once a local government owns the problem, the solutions we can enable, the capabilities we can enhance, and the capacity we help build will be properly implemented and endure long after our team departs.

Overall, I'm hopeful for the future. As I said before, I see a lot of progress in a lot of areas. Every day we work with talented, committed military and civilian leaders in African states who are serious about solving these problems. They see the threat of VEOs and are determined to work across borders and forge new partnerships to stop the spread of these threats. Together with USAFRICOM, SOCAFRICA, and international and interagency partners, we can

"I often tell our team, 'We're not at war in Africa, but our African partners are.' That gives a sense of urgency to all we do. There's no time to waste."

enable responsible leaders to have a powerful, positive impact on the region.

CTC: France has a long history of involvement in Africa. How are the United States and France working together on the continent?

BG Bolduc: The U.S. and France are partners in the counter-extremism fight in the Sahel, working together to disrupt and ultimately defeat AQIM [al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb]. Obviously our French colleagues have been working in the region much longer than anyone in our command, so we can look to them for cultural and language expertise as well as conducting training and advise-and-assist missions in a complementary fashion, ultimately boosting African partner nation capabilities. The French share information with the U.S. and African units to assist in the counter-VEO fight. They've got an incredible logistics, medical, and intelligence network that we can leverage across North and West Africa.

France also cooperates with U.S. and African partners in the Lake Chad Basin as part of the multi-national effort to counter Boko Haram. For that mission in particular, intelligence-sharing and medical support provided by the French have really helped to bolster the African-led Multi-National Joint Task Force's ongoing mission.

But it's key to note that it's not only the French who are active in Africa. For example, during the annual Flintlock exercise, more than 20 African, European, and North American nations participated in the massive capacity-building event. These partners are working across the continent as part of a network of professional militaries committed to building a stronger, more stable, and prosperous Africa. We're proud to work alongside a number of these SOF teams from Europe and North America. But most importantly, I see African nations working across borders to implement regional solutions to counter the spread of VEOs and disrupt illicit networks. This sort of regional cooperation is essential to combat the transnational threats facing our African partners.

CTC: How do you assess the recent targeting of hotels in Mali/Burkina Faso/Ivory Coast by al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb? Is the operational tempo of the adversary increasing? How do you counter this?

BG Bolduc: AQIM's targeting of hotels is not complex, but it is high-profile. This is a direct response to ISIS efforts to expand across Africa and stealing members and smaller groups from AQ influence, such as members in Algeria, Tunisia, Mali, and with Boko Haram in Nigeria. In order to stay relevant to their potential recruits, AQIM has launched high-profile attacks to keep their brand in the headlines. It's a disturbing trend—VEOs competing in the city, using violence to keep their brand relevant. I wouldn't say the ops tempo of these groups is increasing—they've been active for a long time—but their tactics and targets are changing in response



Brigadier General Bolduc inspects troops with his Senegalese counterpart, Brigadier General Amadou Kane, in Thies, Senegal, in February 2016. (U.S. ARMY SPC. ZAYIS BALLESTEROS)

to the situation they find themselves in at the moment. To be clear, AQIM is a pressing threat to our African partners in the region and our cooperation with them seeks to provide information and expertise to enhance their capability to predict, disrupt, and respond to VEO activities.

One of the measures I'd highlight is the inclusion of civil authorities, police, and first responders in our exercise and engagement events. We understand that military won't be the first people on scene during most crisis events such as a hotel attack; it will most likely be police and local authorities. We're working on processes to link these groups to the military structure so information can flow from military sources to local governments to disrupt terror activities before they happen. Also, the process of getting military to the scene and coordinating with local authorities is hugely important to unity-of-effort during a crisis response or hostage rescue.

SOF is only one aspect of a comprehensive approach to countering the AQIM threat. That's why it's important to include inter-agency partners, law enforcement, and civil administration in our engagements. For our African partners, preventing and properly responding to the next hotel attack takes more than just a military effort; it's a huge coordination challenge we've got to practice before it's needed.

CTC: In Nigeria, how has the United States helped in the fight against Boko Haram? What is the degree to which Nigerian military are improving in operational capability and also in dealing with corruption? Can you see progress? What is the

right role for U.S. SOF in Nigeria?

BG Bolduc: As I've said before, cooperation with Nigeria and the surrounding Lake Chad Basin nations is critical to ensuring the success of the counter-Boko Haram mission. The government of Nigeria leads the counter-Boko Haram fight within their country; U.S. efforts focus on assisting affected states to increase their ability to cooperate across borders, share information, and carry out effective counter-VEO ops. This also includes human rights training, messaging, and civil affairs training—again, a comprehensive approach to the problem set.

In recent years, and at the Nigerian government's request, we have worked with the Nigerian military on their counter-force, conducting recurring training events. This training has included basic soldiering skills; basic, small-unit infantry tactics; and leadership training. It's this sort of professionalization-type training that will have the most impact on the problem of corruption. By building a professional, ethical officer and NCO corps, the Nigerian military will become increasingly able to gain the trust and confidence of the people. A fully trained military acting in the best interest of the local population is one of the most powerful legacies our engagement can lead to. Countering Boko Haram is not only about soldiering; it's also important to build a force able to address the grievances of the people in an honest and professional manner.

We have also worked with the Nigeria's Special Boat Service, a unit similar to the Navy SEALs, during the annual Flintlock exercise and other engagements. In addition, we've worked to increase the coordination between Lake Chad Basin countries as part of the

Multi-National Joint Task Force and provide intelligence and imagery via ISR flights based in Cameroon. Everything we're doing in the Lake Chad Basin region is intended to build the right capability and capacity, trust and interoperability of SOF, linked to legitimate civil administration postured to defeat Boko Haram or any other VEOs threatening the stability of the state. That's the bottom line of what our teams are doing across the region.

CTC: There's been a lot of talk about "the Gray Zone." What does this concept mean to you and your operations in Africa?

BG Bolduc: The SOCAFRICA operational environment is volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. The threats facing our African partners are typically non-state actors operating in a transregional and transnational, decentralized, and dispersed construct, surviving in ungoverned and under-governed safe havens created by a populace that has lost hope due to ineffective governance. It's a wickedly complex environment tailor-made for the type of nuanced and professional cooperation SOF is able to provide. Our operating environment is the very definition of "the Gray Zone." We may not be at war in Africa, but our African partners certainly are.

That's where the challenge for our team starts. We operate in a politically sensitive and challenging area of responsibility that simultaneously crosses multiple instruments of power. Diplomacy is key to attaining U.S. policy objectives, and we have to ensure

we're working in a supporting role to each Country Team in order to achieve the synchronized, comprehensive approach to countering the threat of violent extremism in Africa. But there's also development and capacity-building needed to ensure African countries are able to provide the services and security to extend the legitimacy of the state into un- and under-governed areas. Operating in the Gray Zone requires SOCAFRICA to act in a supporting role to a host of other organizations. One must understand, in Africa we are not the kinetic solution. If required, partner nations should do those sorts of operations. We do, however, build this capability, share information, provide advice and assistance, and accompany and support with enablers. That takes a change of mindset for staffs and the flexibility to try new approaches to complement other U.S. government stability efforts. We're part of the solution but not *the* solution.

It sounds like a monumental task—and it is a huge challenge for all involved—but I'm energized by the dedication and commitment of our African partners and the SOF teams supporting them. The men and women I speak to on the continent understand the only way to get at this problem is to do their part and keep moving forward with the incremental improvements their activities enable. I often remind our "One SOF Team" working in Africa that they're literally changing the course of history with their partners. There's no time to waste. **CTC**

Microfinancing the Caliphate: How the Islamic State is Unlocking the Assets of European Recruits

By Magnus Ranstorp

Islamic State recruits from Europe are raising significant funds for the group through multiple microfinancing techniques within the European Union. Moneymaking schemes have included petty theft, fraudulent loan applications, social insurance fraud, and VAT fraud. A range of techniques are being employed by aspiring and active European Islamic State operatives to transfer money to the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, including bringing money with them when they travel to join the group, withdrawing funds from money transfer businesses operating along the Turkey-Syria border, sending cash couriers, and using the *hawala* system. To shrink this funding pipeline, financial intelligence must be better integrated into EU counterterrorism efforts.

Much attention is focused on the Islamic State's macro-level financial resources from within Syria and Iraq, where oil sales, plundering, and taxation as well as donations are the group's primary funding sources. The Islamic State is also known to raise significant funds from exchange rate manipulation and transactions in Jordan and Iraq.¹ There has been, however, less focus on the range of foreign terrorist fighter (FTF) microfinancing schemes and transactions within Europe. This article explores the range of methods used by European Islamic State FTFs to raise and then transfer funds to Islamic State coffers. It is based in large part on a study conducted for the Swedish Financial Supervisory Authority focusing on FTFs from northern European countries as well as extensive interviews with law enforcement, financial investigators, and intelligence officials.²

A Caliphate Cashing In

The Islamic State is encouraging each individual recruit to bring whatever assets are available to contribute to the group's cause. The resulting efforts are often well-organized. As this article will outline, FTF microfinancing schemes range from sophisticated VAT (value-added tax) fraud schemes to benefit fraud. Money Service Businesses (MSBs) like Western Union, Moneygram, and a myriad of other companies operating along the Turkish-Syrian border are heavily used to transfer money, including to middlemen in Turkey

and Syria.

The scale and scope of the travel of European FTFs to Syria and Iraq to join the Islamic State is unprecedented. It is estimated that around 5,000 European Union nationals have joined the Islamic State and to a lesser extent Jabhat al-Nusra since the onset of the Syrian civil war. While there are significant numbers of FTFs departing from France (1,700), Germany (800), and the United Kingdom (700-1,000), there are other smaller states with proportionately higher ratio of their Muslim population leaving for Syria. Belgium has 470 FTFs (including 50 women) who have joined the Islamic State. In Austria, there are over 300 FTFs (with a high proportion of individuals of Chechen descent), which is probably a spillover effect of its vicinity to the Western Balkans, an area from which several hundred FTFs have departed.^a There are an estimated 210 FTFs from the Netherlands. Denmark has 135 FTFs, and Sweden has 299 FTFs, out of which at least 45 are women. In Scandinavia there is a cumulative total of 500 FTFs with almost 200 who have returned.

The large number of European FTFs have provided the Islamic State with significant incoming cash flows. Facilitators encourage aspiring fighters to raise as much money as possible before immigrating to the Islamic State. These facilitators help the recruits identify ways to unlock funds. Recruits with good credit histories and those well placed to defraud financial institutions, as well as those with a network of contacts willing to provide funds, are particularly prized.

Financial contributions vary according to the recruit's individual financial position, ability, and situation. Often male recruits come from dysfunctional families or single-parent families (often without a father) and with multi-criminal backgrounds, having past convictions for drug offenses, theft, or violence. Many have operated together with territorial criminal gangs. Acquiring available funding provides FTFs with enhanced status and position upon their arrival in Syria with the Islamic State, providing significant incentives for them to raise as much cash as possible.

Consequently, there are a number of indicators that may allow law enforcement to identify FTFs before travel. FTFs often make sudden asset sales or transfers ahead of their departure. They often quit their jobs if they have one, and they commonly make unusually large withdrawals from their accounts. A red flag is unusually high activity in combination with many different loans and cash withdrawals. In terms of company financial activity, recruits often generate very large revenue in short periods. Credit is accumulated, and business purchases are at high levels to maximize credit limits

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a This information was collected by Linus Gustafsson at Swedish Defence University throughout 2015-2016 and is based on officially available figures by national authorities or media reports. These figures have been collected from open sources by Swedish Defence University on behalf of the Swedish National Countering Violent Extremism Coordinator every month since mid-2015.

with orders placed within a short period, with purchases often of IT or mobile phones. Bills are never paid. This means that by the time recruit has traveled, unpaid invoices accumulate.

FTFs travel to and from the principal conflict regions in Syria or Iraq through direct or indirect air travel routes (they often break up travel patterns to disguise destination) or through various land routes to staging points in Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon. Turkey is a key hub for FTFs and for funding sources, particularly because of its long, porous land border with Syria. Often FTFs fly into Istanbul and then proceed to fly to Hatay or other airports closer to the Turkish-Syrian border. Some are turned back in Istanbul but then travel via boats through the Greek archipelago to gain entry to Turkey. Many FTFs now avoid Istanbul altogether because they are regularly refused entry. Instead they travel to charter destinations close to Syria. There have been cases of travel through several detour destinations.

There are a range of options used by European FTFs to transfer funds to the Islamic State. Some bring cash on their person across the border in to Syria even though there is a risk the funds will be confiscated by border security agents along the route. This has led others to withdraw funds from Money Service Businesses (MSBs) stationed in the Turkey-Syria border area. Groups of Europeans on their way to join the Islamic State sometime use fixers in the border region to withdraw funds from MSBs, as do Europeans who have already joined the group.³

All this has made Turkey a key hub for the flow of funds to Syria for terrorist use, especially its border towns with Syria. Intelligence suggests that foreign fighters engaged in fighting in Syria withdraw cash from ATMs on the border of Turkey and Syria and that the facilitators who bring them back and forth across the border play a key role in aiding this monetary activity.⁴ Periodic withdrawals occur over prolonged periods along the border areas through MSBs. Small amounts of EUR €500–EUR €1,000 are typically withdrawn to avoid suspicions.

This article will now explore in detail how European FTFs are (1) raising funds for the Islamic State and then (2) transferring this money to the group in Syria and Iraq.

Part 1: Raising Funds

It is important to recognize that there are many legal fundraising activities that are exploited by FTFs, particularly the large charitable sector. The complexity of the crisis in Syria and huge need for humanitarian assistance make the issue of detection of terror finance extremely sensitive and difficult. A few aid agencies operate under strict Islamic State supervision (by the Islamic State Department of Relief) and no international staff is present.⁵ Both charities that are genuinely seeking to provide humanitarian assistance and fake charities that have been set up to channel funds to the Islamic State operate under these conditions. A 2014 Financial Action Task Force (FATF) report found that well-intentioned non-profit organizations (NPOs) most at risk of having funds requisitioned by the terrorist groups were “those engaged in ‘service’ activities ... operating in close proximity to an active terrorist threat” and those “that send funds to counterpart or ‘correspondent’ NPOs located in or close to where terrorists operate.”⁶

Another common method of individual Muslim contribution is through *Tajheez Al-Ghazi*, which roughly translates as waging jihad by proxy by those unable themselves to travel.⁷ This typically involves a complex web of sponsorship with no central hub or

“Intelligence suggests that foreign fighters engaged in fighting in Syria withdraw cash from ATMs on the border of Turkey and Syria and that the facilitators who bring them back and forth across the border play a key role in aiding this monetary activity.”

connector, which makes this type of effort difficult to pinpoint and counter. Funds can be distributed via humanitarian channels, or it may be as simple as buying someone’s airline ticket or sponsoring a piece of equipment. For FTFs from Middle Eastern countries, this contribution is often collected through online crowdfunding from sources in the Gulf States, and there is concern such activity is also going on in Europe.⁸

Theft and Petty Crime

European FTFs have funded their travel to Syria through a range of illicit streams including thefts and petty crime. The fact that a significant number of FTFs have past criminal convictions means they already have experience in raising funds this way. Extremist preachers have justified such criminal fundraising on religious grounds. A prime example was Khalid Zerkani, a Moroccan veteran of the Afghan Jihad who recruited dozens of Belgians to fight jihad in Syria between 2013 and 2014, including the team leader of the Paris attacks Abdelhamid Abaaoud. Zerkani was known as “Papa Noel” by his acolytes in and around the Brussels district of Molenbeek because he encouraged them to rob people in the street and steal the luggage of tourists and then distributed the proceeds to fund their travel to Syria. One Brussels-based FTF received €5000 (\$5700) from Zerkani to make the trip.⁹

Bank Fraud

Many FTFs have taken out loans from banks^b without any intention of paying them back. Amedy Coulibaly, who attacked a kosher grocery store in Paris in January 2015, took out a €6,000 (\$6,700) bank loan in Lille using a fake payslip shortly before the terrorist attack.¹⁰ Some FTFs have applied for the funds via internet applications. In Sweden there are several cases of FTFs taking out unsecured bank loans in combination with other types of fraud such as quick loans (SMS loans) and the leasing of SUVs and other cars with no intention of paying them off and every intention of reselling the vehicles.¹¹

There are also other types of banking fraud. In the United Kingdom, the Metropolitan Police unravelled a large-scale fraud by British FTFs in March 2015 who had pretended to be police officers and were targeting elderly citizens for their bank details.

^b In the 2000s multiple British al-Qa`ida plotters funded their operations through bank fraud. For example, three of those involved in the 2006 transatlantic airline plot successfully applied for loans totaling GBP26,000 (\$37,600). See Paul Cruickshank, “The 2006 Airline Plot,” in Bruce Hoffman and Fernando Reinares eds., *The Evolution of the Global Terrorist Threat*, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, October 2014).

After telling them their bank accounts had been compromised, the FTFs instructed their victims to transfer money to an account under the control of the fraudsters.¹² In May 2016, eight individuals were jailed for defrauding U.K. pensioners out of more than £1 million (\$1.44 million). Around 140 frauds or attempted frauds were discovered by the investigation; the group had used “16 telephone lines to make 5,695 calls to 3,774 different numbers.”¹³

VAT and Business Fraud

The issue of withholding VAT payment is a very common and lucrative method for terror financing. Very large sums can be generated quickly via consumer goods that are easily resold. In Sweden, a 30-year-old salafi preacher, influential among FTFs, was charged with VAT fraud amounting to SEK6 million (\$740,000) in a scheme lasting four months during the first quarter of 2013. He purchased mobile phones and tablets for SEK29.7 million (\$3.6 million) in the United Kingdom and sent the order to his company in Finland. He then resold the shipment to a 23-year-old Swedish FTF and his company in Bergsjön. SEK5 million is believed to be missing still and is thought to be in the Middle East or North Africa.¹⁴

Another Swedish case involves the combined VAT fraud of the 20-year-old son of the late Islamic State of Iraq leader in Mosul (Mohammed Moumou who was killed in 2008 by U.S. forces in Iraq) and a 25-year-old man who worked as case officer for the Swedish Tax Authority.¹⁵ The pair established a company with no employees and began importing iPhones from Lithuania for SEK28 million (\$3.4 million), which they resold to retail outlets at a bargain price, withholding payment of any VAT to the Tax Authority. Owing SEK7.1 million (\$870,000) in VAT payments, the company had no assets. Simultaneously, the 25-year-old had taken out several loans from SEB, Swedbank, Bank Norwegian, and dozens of other credit institutes amounting to SEK1 million (\$120,000).¹⁶ Criminal proceedings were transferred to Turkey and other countries in the region. There are indications these two individuals were part of a much broader financial, criminal enterprise led by Soheil Raffieé Bakhtiarzadeh and Shahin Raffieé Bakhtiarzadeh, two brothers wanted by Europol, on request by Sweden, and involving dozens of companies.¹⁷

These kinds of VAT carousels where phones are sold and resold to different companies create profitable criminal proceeds. In business jargon, these so-called “missing traders” receive a VAT number and then trade quickly before dissolving their companies.¹⁸

Another case of VAT fraud was perpetrated by Abdessamad Fateh in Denmark. Also known as Abu Hamza, he was officially designated by the United States as a foreign terrorist fighter and “a member of a Scandinavia-based network of extremists allegedly linked to al-Qa’ida, [who] has traveled to Syria.”¹⁹ c Abu Hamza had been arrested previously as a suspect in a terror plot against the cartoonist Kurt Westergaard at *Jyllands-Posten* in 2008. He owned a company importing large quantities of chicken and cheese from Germany to Denmark and failed to pay DKK3 million (\$460,000) VAT in a scheme in which accountants acted as facilitators through a series of shell companies—including a travel agency—that were created and then dissolved.²⁰

VAT fraud can assume massive proportions. In 2014 Italian au-

thorities discovered that so-called carbon credit and VAT fraud had occurred between 38 middlemen who sold carbon-credit between Italian SF Energy and a series of companies in Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. This €1.15 billion (\$1.3 billion) tax scam resulted in significant funds being channeled to the Taliban via bank transactions in Cyprus, Hong Kong, and the UAE.²¹

Often these VAT fraud schemes involve fake addresses or designated “fall guys” who assume the legal and financial consequences. This enables the real culprits to continue the scheme elsewhere.

Lease/Loans of SUVs and Cars

One of the most common fraudulent practices is to secure a car loan or leasing option with no intention of paying back the debt. This provides Islamic State sympathizers with opportunities to send cars to the Islamic State in Syria. Often these cars are larger SUVs. For example, Toyota Hilux pickups and Toyota Land Cruisers retrofitted with heavy weapons frequently appear in Islamic State propaganda videos in Iraq, Syria, and Libya.

Toyota Hilux models, for example, whether stolen or purchased, are shipped from around the world to Turkey. There are numerous reported cases of the vehicles coming from as far away as Canada and Australia.²² Vehicles are also often driven from Europe to Turkey and then into Syria by FTFs. Turkish border authorities require coupling a driver with a foreign-registered vehicle for each entry/exit into Turkey. These transfers have become more difficult.

Social Insurance Fraud

The issue of social insurance or benefit fraud has been flagged as a method exploited by FTFs in Syria and Iraq. Much of this problem stems from inadequate control systems requiring unemployed individuals to report regularly to authorities. In some EU states the problem has been exposed by inquiries by authorities. For example, investigation in Denmark revealed that 32 FTFs had received social insurance benefits amounting to DKK379,000 (\$58,000) while they were in Syria fighting for the Islamic State.²³

In Britain a probe has been launched to examine the extent to which British FTFs are abusing the taxpayer social insurance system through false claims, online fraud, and student loans. Police officials have confirmed that women were being used to smuggle out cash derived from benefit fraud as they aroused less suspicion.²⁴ In July 2015, the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) Fraud and Error Service launched a wide probe into the extent of this benefit fraud. Investigations were prioritized after three women from Bradford with nine children between them claimed benefits and had allegedly left for Syria.²⁵

In Belgium in August 2013, the cities of Antwerp and Vilvoorde stopped welfare payments to 29 FTFs as they did not live at their registered address. These FTFs had managed to access their bank accounts via ATMs across the border in Turkey and withdraw money.²⁶ The Dutch authorities took steps to freeze the payment of social benefits to 85 FTFs.²⁷ In France, authorities decided to cut welfare benefits last year for 290 persons identified as jihadis.²⁸

Social Media Crowdfunding

As mentioned above, intelligence officials have flagged crowdfunding as an emerging source of funding for the Islamic State and its terror activity.²⁹ Crowdfunding for specific projects combines clever social media and emotional telethons with the fundraising pow-

c Abu Hamza returned to Denmark after traveling to Syria and later died of natural causes there.

er of a multitude of individuals. Establishing charitable NPOs for this purpose can attract funding through diverse social media sites. According to FATF reports, there are plenty of cases where the appeals for supply and equipment were quickly matched and specific instructions were given over encrypted platforms about where to direct the funds.³⁰

Part 2: Transfer of Funds

Interviews the authors conducted with Western intelligence and law enforcement officials provide a picture of how European FTFs are transferring funds to the Islamic State. It is important to note the Islamic State still relies on access to banking services in Syria and Iraq and in neighboring areas contested by the group. According to one report, “in Iraq alone, approximately ninety such international bank branches continue to operate in contested areas of Ninawa, Salah al-Din, Anbar, and Kirkuk provinces.”³¹ One of its most important access points to the international financial system are bank branches situated in the border region between Turkey and Syria. The Islamic State was also for a period accessing the government funding of workers, which was provided every month in Mosul. The Iraqi government stopped paying these salaries in Mosul last August.³²

Money Service Businesses (MSBs)

Money remittance and currency exchange providers have been exploited for money laundering purposes and terrorism finance. Like money laundering, terrorists use sequencing or the breaking down of amounts into multiple/sequential transactions below the threshold, thereby circumventing mandatory reporting. They also may employ smurfing^d or proxy techniques to avoid detection.

MSBs are widely used in Turkey to transfer FTF funds coming from Europe to recipients within the Islamic State using MSB offices and ATMs along border towns straddling the Syrian-Turkish border. Gazientep, Akcakale, Adiaman, Hacipasa, Reyhanli, and Sanliurfa are just some of the places where arriving and departing FTFs can access financial services. After receiving instructions from recruiters and facilitators, FTFs arrive in pre-determined destinations where they take out funds from MSBs through their home country bank accounts or via wired cash.

Regular withdrawals of smaller amounts along the border is common. As noted by U.K. authorities in a 2015 report, “funds are typically broken down in to smaller amounts to avoid the need to provide identification and to avoid detection. Intelligence also indicates that employees have been known to facilitate funds to terrorists through their position within MSBs.”^{33 e}

To avoid detection, the Islamic State regularly changes the playbook it provides European FTFs and their facilitators on how to move money. For example, after Western Union and a number of other MSBs began watching more closely for Islamic State linked

transactions in the Syria-Turkey border area, the Islamic State urged aspiring European FTFs to transfer sums under €5,000 (\$5,700). For a period of time, they also encouraged them to transfer funds through MSBs to recipients in Bosnia, particularly in the Brcko district, because it was seen as a safer option. Islamic State operatives provided contact details for these recipients.^f

Pre-paid debit cards

Another way FTFs and terrorists conceal their tracks have been through pre-paid debit cards. These can be recharged without identity checks as long as the total amount does not exceed €2,500 (\$2,800) per year. They were used to rent hotel rooms outside Paris the night before the November 13, 2015, attacks.³⁴

Informal Money Transfer Systems (Hawala)

The traditional system of *hawala* is in operation around the world. In many cases Islamic State financial transactions are conducted through an underground *hawaladar* network established throughout Iraq, Syria, and beyond. As the Islamic State consolidates control over its provinces, such as in Libya, it is clear the group is relying increasingly on *hawala* networks for transferring funds.³⁵ This mechanism will increase in importance as the Islamic State expands in operational areas with infrequent or no access to international financial institutions.

In Europe it has been easier to detect and disrupt *hawala* networks being used for terrorist purposes. The most prominent case was the 2015 roll-up of a massive, secret *hawala* network composed of 300 *hawaladars* with clandestine offices in Spanish cities through 250 butcher shops, grocery stores, and telephone call centers. They managed “the savings of over 150,000 Muslims, many of whom were believed to be receiving social welfare payments from the Spanish state, without any legal oversight. The network allegedly paid the salaries of Spanish jihadis in Syria: They received about \$800 if they were single and \$1,200 if they were married.”³⁶

Cash Couriers

The Islamic State uses cash couriers to circumvent multi-layered barriers placed on the group by Western financial institutions. These cash couriers provide essential services for the Islamic State inside Syria and Iraq as well as across the border in Turkey where the money is distributed to trusted networks and used to buy essential equipment.

The system of cash couriers also works the opposite direction with European FTFs and support networks concealing and transporting cash to the Islamic State and their fighters. In one such case, Amal el-Wahabi, a British mother-of-two, was arrested and convicted in the U.K. for trying to smuggle €20,000 (\$23,000) to her husband in Syria.³⁷

Conclusion

FTF microfinancing schemes are important to focus on for a number of reasons. They reveal a disturbing pattern of the Islamic State’s wider and deeper efforts to find funding from a diverse range of

d Smurfing involves the process of making numerous cash deposits into several bank accounts.

e It is also important to recognize that FTF facilitators use the MSBs for a variety of purposes. They receive payment for facilitation of travel of fighters on behalf of the Islamic State but have also received funds through them from worried parents who want to extract radicalized children from the clutches of the Islamic State. This information is based on testimony from relatives of FTFs in both The Hague (September 2014) and Stockholm (November 2014).

f This area is a well-known jihadist hotspot. The village of Gornja Maoca, for example, contains a high concentration of jihadis. See Gordon N. Bardos, “Jihad in the Balkans: The Next Generation,” *World Affairs*, September/October 2014.

sources. For the Islamic State, every recruit holds the potential to unlock financial assets. Focusing on FTF financial sources also provides important insights into the web of the Islamic State's trans-national networks and local recruitment/facilitation focal points. There is a greater need to tackle the Islamic State's network in Europe using financial enforcement agencies and tools. This requires a more concerted effort by governments to integrate financial in-

telligence into counterterrorism machinery within and across EU states. This is increasingly urgent as intelligence officials point out that money flows are not just going in one direction—from recruits to the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. Intelligence now suggests that money is sent from Islamic State sources to recruits and supporters in Europe as ways to fund terror operations.³⁸ **CTC**

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Al-Zawahiri's Bay 'a to Mullah Mansoor: A Bitter Pill but a Bountiful Harvest

By Tore Hamming and Olivier Roy

After Taliban emir Mullah Mansoor was killed in a U.S. drone strike on May 21, one key question is whether al-Qa'ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri will pledge allegiance to his successor. When al-Zawahiri pledged allegiance (*bay 'a*) to Mansoor last summer, some observers were puzzled. Instead of laying claim to the title of emir al-mu'minin (commander of the faithful) and directly challenging Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi for leadership of the global jihadist movement, al-Zawahiri exposed himself to ridicule by subordinating himself to a man whose succession to Mullah Omar was opposed initially by significant factions of the Taliban movement. But at a time of rising competition from the Islamic State, al-Zawahiri arguably had little choice. His decision was consistent with strategic maxims that have defined his career, including forging and maintaining alliances to offset weakness. Nine months later, with the Taliban surging in Afghanistan and al-Qa'ida riding its coattails, his decision appears to be paying dividends, and he is likely to pledge *bay 'a* to Mansoor's successor, Mullah Haibatullah Akhunzada.

When al-Qa'ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, the 64-year-old veteran of global jihad and the haughty scion of an 'aristocratic' Egyptian family, subordinated himself on August 13, 2015, to a Pashtun tribesman at least 10 years his junior by pledging *bay 'a*¹ to the new emir of the Afghan Taliban, Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor, it must have been a bitter pill to swallow. Rather than assume the mantle of emir al-mu'minin (commander of the faithful) and directly challenge Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi for leadership of the global jihadist movement, al-Zawahiri opted to play second fiddle to a man whose succession

to Mullah Omar was opposed by significant factions of his own Taliban movement, some of whom depicted Mansoor as a pawn of Pakistan's intelligence services.

Accentuating the irony, al-Zawahiri had initially opposed Usama bin Ladin's pledge of allegiance to Mullah Omar two decades previously, if we are to trust the account given by Egyptian jihadi Mustaf Hamid (better known as Abu'l-Walid al-Masri).² More doctrinally oriented and ideologically rigid than bin Ladin, al-Zawahiri appears to have believed the Taliban were too deviant in doctrine. A survey conducted by jihadis in Afghanistan in the late 1980s shows that members of al-Zawahiri's Egyptian Islamic Jihad believed "nothing is to be hoped for from the war in Afghanistan, nor will there arise an Islamic State there, on account of doctrinal/ideological defects among the leaders and the masses."³

This article argues that in the summer of 2015 with the Islamic State threatening to eclipse al-Qa'ida as the standard-bearer of global jihad, al-Zawahiri had little choice but to nail his colors to the Taliban mast. It argues his decision was consistent with strategic maxims that have defined his career, including forging and maintaining alliances to offset weaknesses. And finally it will document how, despite exposing himself to ridicule from Islamic State supporters after Mullah Mansoor's leadership got off to a shaky start, his decision paid dividends as Mansoor consolidated his position and the Taliban started surging in Afghanistan. For those reasons, after Mansoor was killed on May 21 in a U.S. drone strike in Balochistan, al-Zawahiri is likely to swear fealty to his successor, despite the risk of new convulsions within the Taliban after they announce a new leader.⁴

Al-Zawahiri's Quandary

When it became known that Mullah Omar was dead and Mullah Mansoor was elected as his successor in July 2015, al-Zawahiri and the al-Qa'ida network were placed in a quandary. The al-Qa'ida leader was under pressure to make a decision that would enable his organization to once again appear relevant in the eyes of the world's jihadis.

Just a year after establishing its caliphate, the Islamic State seemed poised to eclipse al-Qa'ida as the world's dominant jihadi movement, and without the charismatic and authoritative leadership of bin Ladin, al-Qa'ida risked being sidelined. Al-Zawahiri's passive approach to the controversy caused by the rift between Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Abu Muhammad al-Julani that eventually led to the split and the creation of Jabhat al-Nusra left the impression of al-Qa'ida's paramount emir as a leader without much authority. Analysts and jihadis alike started to talk about al-Zawahiri's irrelevance and hence, the election of Mullah Mansoor both presented al-Zawahiri with a risk and an opportunity. Should he play it safe and continue to play second fiddle to a new Taliban emir, or should he seize the opportunity and challenge the global rise of the Islamic State and al-Baghdadi even if that meant losing the support

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of the Taliban and hurting its position in Afghanistan and Pakistan?

To many in the jihadist fold, al-Zawahiri's decision to pledge allegiance to Mullah Mansoor confirmed the general impression of him as an old man growing increasingly irrelevant, out-of-sync, and lacking in the courage to confront the Islamic State. But above all it exposed the fragility of al-Qa`ida's position. Al-Zawahiri arguably had little choice but to subordinate himself to Mansoor and maintain the Taliban alliance. As Barak Mendelsohn has noted, al-Qa`ida and al-Zawahiri's alliances have often been sought out of weakness rather than of strength.⁵

Bin Ladin's Bay`a

Bin Ladin's original *bay`a* to Mullah Omar had also been borne of necessity. In 1999 when bin Ladin finally decided to pledge allegiance to Mullah Omar he did so because he assessed that it was the best strategic option rather than for any ideological or doctrinal reasons.^a Al-Qa`ida, having been displaced from Sudan, was without a sanctuary and so allying with the Taliban made sense in order to receive shelter in the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and to consolidate its position among a myriad of competing militant groups operating in Afghanistan at the time.^{6 b} Relocating back to Afghanistan after a brief period in Saudi Arabia and then Sudan, bin Ladin was in need of local support to continue his global jihad project. Being on friendly terms with the Taliban, which was governing Afghanistan, was imperative in these efforts. Vahid Brown argues that bin Ladin's pledge was "a calculated political move" and "a strategy of expediency," thus highlighting bin Ladin's weak negotiating position. He needed the Taliban more than they needed him.

The original *bay`a* from bin Ladin to Mullah Omar has always been shrouded in mystery. No footage exists of the event and neither bin Ladin nor Mullah Omar issued any communication on the matter. Apparently it seems that after a long period of contemplation, in 1999 bin Ladin decided to pledge allegiance to Mullah Omar via proxy, namely the Egyptian jihadi Abu'l-Walid al-Masri, who was close to the Taliban.⁸ Despite all the uncertainty about what actually happened, it is known that bin Ladin's pledge of allegiance



Ayman al-Zawahiri

was what jihadis refer to as a "greater bay`a,"^c which he himself confirmed on several occasions.^d The *bay`a* effectively placed the al-Qa`ida founder below Mullah Omar in the global jihadist hierarchy.

Al-Zawahiri's Strategic Rationale

Although the context was very different in the summer of 2015, al-Zawahiri, like bin Ladin, found himself in a dependent position with the Taliban because of the rise of the Islamic State. Despite his initial disdain for the Taliban, years living in the region had softened his attitude. By the late 2000s with a Taliban insurgency gaining ground, Afghanistan had become a key focus of al-Zawahiri's public statements,⁹ and soon after he assumed the top job in al-Qa`ida in 2011, al-Zawahiri himself pledged *bay`a* to Mullah Omar.^{10 e}

At a time when the Islamic State was threatening to eclipse al-Qa`ida in the Arab world, the Afghanistan-Pakistan region was one of the few geographic areas where al-Qa`ida retained primacy in the contest between the two groups, despite a nascent challenge from a group calling itself the Islamic State in Khorasan. For al-Zawahiri, refusing to pledge loyalty to Mansoor would have been to put all that at risk and potentially to lose out on significant future opportunities. Despite its damaged credibility because of the deba-

c Pledges of allegiance, or *bay`a*, play an important role within the jihadi milieu. Formally, it is about giving and obtaining authority. However, as is evident in the al-Qa`ida-Taliban relationship, pledges of allegiance are often the result of strategic decisions. Jihadis work with three categories of *bay`a*: the greater *bay`a* (*bay`at al-uzma*), the smaller *bay`a* (*bay`at 'amma*), and the war *bay`a* (*bay`at harb*). The difference between the three types pertains to the scope of authority given to a leader. Another and more pragmatic way of viewing the *bay`a* is proposed by Abu Ja'far al-Hattab, a Tunisian former sharia council member of Ansar al-Shariah, who now has allegedly shifted sides to the Islamic State. Al-Hattab defines two types of *bay`a*, one being 'restricted' and the other 'unrestricted'. The restricted *bay`a* is given to the leader of a militant group, its terms are limited geographically and obligates obedience only in relation to jihad. This resembles something in between the smaller *bay`a* and the war *bay`a*. The unrestricted *bay`a* is given to the head of a political community—an emir or caliph—and its terms are unlimited, obligating obedience in all matters. An unrestricted *bay`a* is similar to the greater *bay`a*.

d In June 2001, Usama bin Ladin again spoke about his pledge to Mullah Omar, confirming it was a "greater pledge" (*bay`a 'uzma*). Anne Stenersen and Philipp Holtmann, "The Three Functions of UBL's 'Greater Pledge' to Mullah Omar (2001-2006-2014)," *Jihadology.net*, January 8, 2015.

e In his obituary for bin Ladin, al-Zawahiri says, "We renew the oath of allegiance to the Amir of Believers Mulla Muhammad Omar Mujahid, may Allah protect him, and we promise him to hear and obey, in bad and good times, and on Jihad for the cause of Allah and establishing Sharia and supporting the oppressed." See Ayman al-Zawahiri, "And the Noble Knight Dismounts," June 8, 2011.

a Ideologically, the Taliban and al-Qa`ida differ as the former is nationalist focused whereas the latter engages in global jihad. When it comes to religious doctrine, the mainly Deobandi (and tribal-influenced) Taliban follow the Hanafi school of *fiqh* and are considered less strict, or purist, than the salafi-dominated al-Qa`ida.

b This strategic political reason indeed sounds plausible considering how Deobandi doctrine and Hanafi *fiqh* are generally perceived negatively within the jihadi-salafi current.

cle of the cover up of Mullah Omar's death, the Taliban had been gaining ground steadily in Afghanistan for a number of years and last summer were poised to make additional gains as international forces further scaled back their presence.

On a broader level, al-Zawahiri's decision to pledge allegiance to Mansoor fits a general strategy al-Zawahiri has pursued for decades that is characterized by three priorities: seizing territory as a staging point for further expansion, winning the support of the Muslim masses, and jihadist bridge-building.¹¹ After what appears to have been his initial disdain for Afghans, his public statements since 9/11 make clear he has come to see the Taliban as a vehicle for realizing all three of his strategic priorities in Afghanistan and Pakistan.¹² The importance of forging alliances for al-Zawahiri became evident in the 1990s with his cooperation with bin Laden in Sudan and his overtures to the Saudi jihadi commander in Chechnya Ibn al-Khattab.¹³ Later he signed the World Islamic Front *fatwa* with bin Laden, while more recent examples include his welcoming in 2006 of the Algerian terrorist group GSPC into the fold as a fully fledged al-Qa`ida affiliate¹⁴ (AQIM), accepting the *bay`a* from al-Shabaab in 2012, and Jabhat al-Nusra's strategy entering into military coalitions in Syria alongside more moderate factions.

Bitter Pill

Though it fit al-Zawahiri's strategic rationale, embracing Mansoor also had major risks. When he declared his fealty to Mansoor, some analysts argued the pledge "might be a large step toward AQ's demise."¹⁵ This was in no small part because of the catastrophic way Mullah Omar's death was handled by the Taliban and questions about the legitimacy of Mullah Mansoor.

Despite recent Taliban efforts to play up his jihadi credentials, Mansoor was not known for his exploits on the battlefield. Although he fought the Russians in the 1980s, he was mainly seen since then as a political figure within the Taliban occupying positions as a minister before 9/11 and then as the shadow governor of Kandahar Province.^f Mansoor's slow start in gaining support from his own Taliban movement must thus have been a great concern for al-Zawahiri. In the months after Mansoor's appointment several important Taliban figures and splinter groups attacked his authority. Not only did Mansoor initially fail to get the support of the family of Mullah Omar,^g he was also criticized by senior Taliban leaders, most importantly by Mullah Qayum Zakir, an influential senior military commander who has been working actively against Mansoor's efforts to crackdown on internal critiques. Zakir was supported in opposition to Mansoor when a group of approximately three dozen religious leaders in Quetta wrote a letter explicitly refuting the authority of Mullah Mansoor.¹⁶ Less surprising, the former Taliban commander Mullah Mansour Dadullah, who was expelled from the Taliban in 2007 but remained a popular figure within the broader movement, made clear his opposition to the new Taliban emir.¹⁷ Perhaps due to his criticism or because he was flirting with the Islamic State,

Dadullah was killed in November 2015 in a gunfight with Taliban fighters in Zabul's Khak-e-Afghan district.¹⁸ The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, popularly referred to as the Pakistani Taliban, has also declined to pledge allegiance to Mansoor, although this was not considered a necessity by Afghan Taliban leaders as the groups are separate entities.

The al-Qa`ida leader's *bay`a* to Mansoor also presented the Islamic State and its followers with a new platform to ridicule al-Zawahiri. After splitting from al-Qa`ida on February 3, 2014, the Islamic State had generally sought to delegitimize al-Zawahiri, arguing that he was growing increasingly irrelevant, that he deviated from the path of bin Laden, and that he is not fit to lead the global jihadist movement. But they had generally held off from criticizing the popular Mullah Omar and the Taliban. For example, in 2011 Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, then spokesperson of the Islamic State in Iraq (now the Islamic State), praised both the Taliban and the leadership of Mullah Omar.¹⁹

But when the Taliban confirmed the death of Mullah Omar, the Islamic State went for the jugular. Since then, on the pages of Dabiq and Dar al-Islam magazines, it has depicted the Taliban as a nationalist movement that aims to obtain power within the territory of Afghanistan, which does not fit well with the salafi rejection of modern state boundaries or their focus on the global *ummah*. Mansoor was targeted for how he kept the death of Mullah Omar a secret for two years while publishing statements and speeches in the former Taliban leader's name,²⁰ while al-Zawahiri was ridiculed for giving *bay`a* to a person whose authority is not only contested within his own movement but who is also considered to be collaborating with the Pakistani intelligence service, ISI.²¹ Al-Zawahiri also received criticism for the fact that al-Qa`ida renewed²² its allegiance to Mullah Omar in 2014, the year after he had died as it turned out. In one of the sharpest attacks, the leader of Islamic State in Khorasan, Hafidh Said Khan condemned the ideology of the Taliban and the behavior of Mansoor while claiming that Mansoor's leadership had caused a mass exodus of Taliban fighters to the Islamic State.²³

In interviews the authors conducted with Islamic State members, the impression was that al-Zawahiri's *bay`a* to Mansoor has been considered a complete joke.²⁴ Not only do Islamic State members portray Mansoor as in the pocket of Pakistan's ISI, but they also claim that he is collaborating with the Iranian intelligence service and that the *bay`a* can only be interpreted as a sign of desperation. To add insult to injury there has been gleeful circulation among credulous Islamic State supporters of an audio tape allegedly dating back to 2007 in which Mullah Omar refers to Mullah Mansoor as not being fit to lead the Taliban, despite all the indications that Mullah Omar was referring to a different Mansoor.²⁵^h

Bountiful Harvest

Despite being a bitter pill to swallow, al-Zawahiri's *bay`a* produced

^f The Taliban published a 5,000-word biography on Mullah Akhtar Mansoor. Taliban, "Introduction of the newly appointed leader of Islamic Emirate, Mullah Akhtar Mohammad (Mansur), may Allah safeguard him," September 2015.

^g Mullah Omar's eldest son, Mullah Yaqoub, and his brother, Mullah Manan, were initially opposed to the leadership of Mullah Mansoor. See Saleem Mehsud, "Kunduz Breakthrough Bolsters Mullah Mansoor as Taliban Leader," *CTC Sentinel* 8:10 (2015).

^h Al-Qa`ida and Taliban followers have argued that Mullah Omar, in fact, was not referring to the Taliban leader Mullah Mansoor but to the renegade Mullah Mansoor Dadullah. If the dating of the audio is correct, it could very well be that Mullah Omar was talking about Dadullah as he was expelled from the Taliban later that year by Mullah Omar after Dadullah took over a senior military commander position from his older brother Mullah Dadullah Akhund, who was killed in 2007. Whether this is the case or not, it did not prevent Islamic State followers from using the recording to sow doubt about the legitimacy of Mullah Mansoor and, as a result, of al-Zawahiri.

an increasingly bountiful harvest. Three developments provided him with a degree of vindication. First, after the initial turbulence, Mullah Mansoor managed to consolidate internal support by bribing senior commanders or appointing them to central positions. At the time of his death, that support included Mullah Omar's family as his son and brother recently joined the Taliban's leadership council.²⁶

Second, the Taliban insurgency is currently on the rise in Afghanistan as international forces are leaving the country, bolstering Mansoor before he was killed and allowing al-Qa`ida to ride the Taliban's coattails as they expand their presence in Afghanistan. Last year the Taliban managed to take over and hold the northern provincial capital of Kunduz for a few weeks,²⁷ and it recently launched its spring offensive, titled "Omari," which started off with a devastating suicide attack in Kabul.²⁸ The rising fortunes of the Taliban has facilitated a significant comeback for al-Qa`ida in the region, leading an Afghani defense official to claim that al-Qa`ida is once again "very active" while U.S. Major General Jeff Buchanan argues that al-Qa`ida has more fighters than earlier estimated and has managed to establish several training camps in area under Taliban control. In one camp alone, U.S. forces found more than 150 al-Qa`ida fighters.²⁹

Third, the al-Qa`ida-Taliban alliance was strengthened under Mansoor. According to U.S. General John Nicholson, Mullah Mansoor's legitimacy gap initially forced him to move closer to groups like al-Qa`ida.³⁰ This was evidenced in Mansoor's effusive praise for al-Zawahiri in response to the various groups that pledged *bay`a*. "I first and foremost accept the pledge of allegiance of the esteemed Dr. Ayman ad-Dhawahiri [al-Zawahiri], the leader of international Jihadi organization (QaedaJihad)."³¹ Furthermore, in a move to consolidate his power, Mansoor appointed Sirajuddin Haqqani, the son of Jalaluddin Haqqani, as one of his two deputies. Sirajuddin is known to be very close to al-Qa`ida and, according to U.S. intelligence sources, even to be on al-Qa`ida's Shura Council.³²

These developments have enabled al-Qa`ida to build up a stronger presence in Afghanistan and have allowed al-Zawahiri to pursue his long-term strategy of building up mass support and a territorial base for the future expansion of jihad. But al-Zawahiri also got lucky. The situation now would have been rather different had Mansoor failed to consolidate power. To argue that al-Zawahiri knew how things would turn out would probably be giving him too much credit. This opinion is certainly shared within the Islamic State and among its supporters, who continue to discredit the al-Qa`ida leader.

It should also be noted that al-Zawahiri's *bay`a* to Mansoor was not supported explicitly by the leaders of any of al-Qa`ida's affiliates, who remained quiet on the issue with only individual al-Qa`ida members, like al-Qa`ida official Hussam Abdul Raouf, following

al-Zawahiri's lead and pledging allegiance to the Taliban leader.³³

Despite the overall positives for al-Zawahiri in pledging allegiance to Mansoor, the latter's death was also a reminder of the vulnerability of al-Zawahiri's position. To a significant degree, his decision to pledge *bay`a* to Mansoor last summer locked him in to pledging the same oath to any successor, despite the risk that there could be a new power struggle within the Taliban that might jeopardize its gains in Afghanistan and open the door once again to the Islamic State. Given that his pledge to Mansoor paid dividends, al-Zawahiri is likely to move quickly to swear *bay`a* to his successor, Mullah Haibatullah Akhunzada, who was elected as the new leader on May 25. Although Haibatullah always was the likely candidate, both Sirajuddin Haqqani, the other deputy leader under Mansoor, and Mullah Omar's son Mullah Mohammed Yaqoob were mentioned as potential candidates. To build on Mansoor's efforts of unifying the Taliban movement, Haqqani and Yaqoob have been elected new deputies in a move that favors not only the powerful Haqqani network but also Mullah Omar's family and the Kandahari faction of the Taliban. The Taliban's choice for stability is important for al-Zawahiri as it minimizes the risks of divisions and damaging repercussions for al-Qa`ida.

Conclusion

Pledging allegiance to Mullah Mansoor was arguably the least bad choice al-Zawahiri could make in the summer of 2015 given the mounting challenge from the Islamic State and the need for every ally he could get to maintain al-Qa`ida's standing in the global jihadist movement. And while it led to heated criticism in the short-term, it is now paying dividends.

With the Islamic State seizing the initiative in many parts of the Arab world, Afghanistan and Pakistan remain one of the few regions in the world where al-Qa`ida retains primacy, and al-Zawahiri likely believes it is imperative to maintain this as part of a longer-term effort to roll back Islamic State influence worldwide. He is likely, therefore, to swear *bay`a* to Mullah Haibatullah. While the Islamic State has built up a nascent presence in Afghanistan, in recent months the Taliban appears to have contained and even reversed the gains made by the rival group.³⁴

With the Taliban growing ever stronger in Afghanistan as it exploits the void left by retreating international forces, al-Zawahiri likely believes al-Qa`ida has an opportunity to expand significantly its presence in the country as a new territorial base from which to challenge the Islamic State. There has been growing evidence of al-Qa`ida restoring a presence in Afghanistan, including the building up of operations by Farouq al-Qahtani in Nuristan and Kunar provinces³⁵ and the establishment of a sprawling camp complex near Kandahar, which was dismantled last October.³⁶ **CTC**

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The Strategic Topography of Southern Libya

By Andrew McGregor

If the security situation in Libya deteriorates and the Islamic State makes further gains on the southern shores of the Mediterranean, there is the possibility that a coalition of foreign powers will feel compelled to intervene militarily. While such an intervention would likely be focused on the coastal regions, it would also likely have unforeseen consequences for southern Libya, a strategically vital region that supplies most of the country's water and electricity. Militants could react by targeting this infrastructure or fleeing southward, destabilizing the region. For these reasons it is imperative that policymakers understand the strategic topography of southern Libya.

The Islamic State has succeeded in establishing a base in Sirte, Libya, on the Mediterranean coast, uncomfortably close to Europe. Unless a new government can unite the nation in deploying state security forces to eliminate the threat posed by the Islamic State, Ansar al-Sharia, and other extremist groups, there is a possibility of foreign military intervention. In this case, extremists could target the lightly guarded oil and water infrastructure in southern Libya essential for the survival of the nation.

Bitter and bloody tribal conflicts have erupted in the south since the 2011 Libyan Revolution, and in the absence of state authority, various militias established their own version of security and border controls. There is a strong danger of further violence in the south spreading to Libya's southern neighbors or encouraging new independence movements. Identifying specific strategic locations in southern Libya, this article outlines the security challenges posed in each locale by virtue of its geography as well as its ethnic, political, and sectarian rivalries.

Until recently, the inability of Libya's rival governments—the Tripoli-based General National Council (GNC) and the Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR)—to cooperate on the terrorism file has hampered the ability of foreign governments to provide military assistance. It has impeded Libya's ability to tackle Islamist extremist movements as well, but this is beginning to change due to growing support for a unified Government of National Accord.¹

Libya-based terrorist groups are mainly concentrated in the Mediterranean coastal strip, but they have recognized the importance of Libya's southern interior and the vast reserves of energy

and water vital for Libyan viability. Control of the south determines whether the lights go on in Tripoli or Benghazi, whether water runs from the taps, and whether salaries are paid or not. It also means control of important trade and smuggling routes, the source of narcotics, armed militants, and waves of desperate African refugees risking their lives to reach Europe.

Currently, there are indications that France, Italy, the U.K., and the United States have either initiated limited interventions in the form of small Special Forces units or are contemplating greater military involvement to destroy Libya's Islamic State group and end the uncontrolled movement of refugees to Europe from the Libyan coast.² In March the United Nations' special envoy to Libya, Martin Kobler, warned Libyans that if they do not quickly address the problems of terrorism presented by Islamist extremists, "others will manage the situation."³ However, Libyans' bitter experience with colonialism makes them highly suspicious of the motives behind any type of foreign intervention.

Geographic Considerations

Libya is composed of three main regions: Tripolitania (the northwest), Cyrenaica (the eastern half), and Fezzan (the southwest). Most of Libya's water and energy resources are found in the south, an area of rocky plateaus known as *hamadat* and sand seas (*ramlat*), all punctuated with small oases and brackish lakes. Mountainous areas include the Tadrart Acacus near Ghat in the Fezzan, the Bikku Bitti Mountains along the Chadian border, and Jabal Uwaynat in the southeast. The climate is exceedingly hot and arid with an average temperature of over 30 degrees Celsius; dry river beds known as *wadis* carry away the limited rainfall and are commonly used to conceal the movements of military or smuggling convoys. Sandstorms and high winds are common in March and April. The severe climate and isolation of Saharan Libya make it difficult to find security personnel from the north willing to serve there.

A Qaddafi initiative, the Great Man-Made River (GMR) taps immense reserves of fossil water (water trapped underground for more than a millennium) contained in the Nubian Sandstone aquifer under the Libyan desert to supply Libya's coastal cities and various agricultural projects. GMR pipelines are vulnerable to tribal groups angered by government activities.⁴

There are five energy basins (regions containing oil and gas reserves) in Libya: Ghadames/Berkine (northwest); Sirte, the most productive (central); Murzuq (southwest); Kufra (southeast); and the Cyrenaica platform (northeast). Of these, only the Kufra Basin is not yet in production.⁵

Libya's oases provide water and resting points in a strategic life-line through otherwise inhospitable terrain and permit overland contact between the settlements of the Mediterranean coast and the African interior. Today, oil and water pipelines follow these routes, giving them even greater importance in the modern era.

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The Tribal Situation

The southern Arabs fear that post-revolutionary demands for citizenship by non-Arab Tubu and Tuareg will make citizens of tens of thousands of non-Arabs from outside Libya's borders, leaving the Arabs a minority in the region. The Tubu and Tuareg, in turn, fear they are victims of Arab machinations to cleanse Libya of non-Arab groups. The Tubu, an indigenous African group, are found in Chad, northeastern Niger, and southern Libya, with a traditional stronghold in the remote Tibesti mountain range of northern Chad.⁶ The Tuareg are an indigenous Berber group organized in various confederations and spread through much of the Sahara/Sahel region, where they traditionally maintained control of trans-Saharan trade routes. In Libya the local Tuareg live in the southwest and are part of the Kel Ajjar confederation also found in eastern Algeria.

Strategic Sites in Southern Libya

In April 2014, French Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian described southern Libya as "a viper's nest in which jihadists are returning, acquiring weapons and recruiting." Through Ottoman and Italian colonial rule, southern Libya provided a place of refuge for political, tribal, and religious groups that came into conflict with the established powers. More recently, it has offered operating space to extremist groups forced from neighboring areas such as northern Mali. With the development of Libyan plans to assault the Islamic State enclave in Sirte and the possibility of foreign military intervention at some point in the future if those efforts fail, it is worthwhile to examine those strategic sites in southern Libya that might provide new bases for Islamist extremists or those forces involved in combating such movements.

Ghat

As a garrison town on the Algerian border and a center for Qaddafi loyalists, Ghat was one of the last urban areas in Libya to fall to rebel forces in late September 2011. Dotted throughout southern Libya are Ottoman and Italian fortresses, built on heights wherever possible to control important oases or the intersection of vital trade routes; many of these now serve as bases for regional militias. In Ghat, Tuareg militias hold the large Italian fortress built in the 1930s on the Koukemen Hill. There is also an airport 18 kilometers north of Ghat. The Ghat Tuareg control the Tinkarine border crossing into Algeria. Control of this crossing in the event of a foreign intervention would be essential to prevent cross-border movement of extremist groups. The Algerian Army closed the border with Libya in May 2014 after the In Amenas attacks, which originated in al-Uwaynat (not to be confused with al-Uwaynat in southeastern Libya), northeast of Ghat.⁸

Hun

Hun is the main town in al-Jufra oasis and a former colonial base for long-range patrols by the Italian Compagnia Sahariana. Other settlements in al-Jufra include Waddan, site of a pre-Ottoman Arab fortress; Sokna, the site of an Ottoman castle; Zellah Oasis, which is overlooked by a massive Italian-era hilltop fortress; and al-Fugha, a small oasis devoted, like the others, to date production. Al-Jufra Airbase is a dormant Libyan Air Force facility.

Jalu and Awjala

These oases are not in southern Libya proper, but they form an important link on the Kufra-Ajdabiya road and an entry point to the



Strategic locations in Libya (Rowan Technology)

string of oases in Egypt's Western Desert, a suspected route for arms traffickers. The town of Jalu, an important center for nearby oil fields, is located some 250 kilometers southeast of the Gulf of Sidra, while Awjala is about 30 kilometers northwest of Jalu. Jalu proved its strategic importance in both World War II and the Libyan Civil War during attempts to outflank opposing forces operating closer to the coast. Its size (19 kilometers by 11 kilometers) and freshwater supplies made it a useful base for military operations. As the dominant group in both oases is Eastern Berber, there is a possibility that ethnic tensions could be inflamed by renewed military activity in this strategically vital locale.

Kufra

The town of Kufra and a surrounding cluster of small oases and agricultural projects have a population of roughly 40,000. Its strategic importance lies in its location between two sand seas, which, with its reserves of fresh water and food, make it an inevitable stop for vehicles making their way between the Cyrenaican coast and the African interior.

Zuwaya Arabs are the majority in Kufra, which has a Tubu minority. Both the Tubu and the Zuwaya maintain important communities in Ajdabiya charged with protecting tribal interests at the northern terminus of the trade route from Kufra. Should conflict erupt between these communities as a consequence of foreign military activity in the Ajdabiya region, the result could easily be the spread of communal clashes to the volatile Kufra area.

The route between Kufra and Ajdabiya was the site of numerous skirmishes between Qaddafi loyalists and Libyan rebels during the civil war, with the Qaddafiists carrying out a long-range desert attack to seize Kufra before working their way north to the Jalu and Awjala oases, where efforts were made to damage water and oil installations.⁹ The limited cooperation between revolutionary Tubu and Zuwaya against the Qaddafi regime did not last, with the Zuwaya describing the Tubu as Qaddafiists collaborators or even foreign mercenaries. In 2012, the Zuwaya constructed large sand berms around Kufra to cut Tubu connections with the outside.

Disputes over control of smuggling and trading routes south of Kufra led to clashes between Tubu and Zuwaya in 2011, 2012, and 2013 that left hundreds dead. Mediation brought an end to a further two months of fighting in early November 2015. Isa Abd al-Majid Mansur, leader of the Tubu Front for the Salvation of Libya (TFSL), has promoted the idea of foreign intervention in Libya, suggesting the Tubu would make good partners in international counterterrorism and anti-smuggling operations.¹⁰ While seemingly attractive given the Tubu's deep knowledge of the little-known region, acceptance would immediately be viewed as unacceptable by rival Arab groups and inevitably regarded as a means of challenging the "Arab essence" of the Libyan state.

The construction of the Trans-Saharan road connecting Darfur to Kufra in the 1980s increased cross-border trade but also opened a reliable route for smugglers, human traffickers, and gunmen. Qatar appears to have used the route from Sudan to ship ammunition to Islamist militias in 2011.¹¹

Darfur rebels of the Sudanese Liberation Movement-Minni Minnawi (SLM-MM) were accused by the GNC and the Sudanese government of collaborating with Tubu forces under the direction of General Khalifa Haftar in the unsuccessful September 20, 2015, attack on Kufra.¹² The SLM-MM and Darfur's Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) were accused of committing armed robberies and

setting up illegal checkpoints north of Kufra this year before being driven out by Zuwaya militias in a two-day battle in February.¹³ On April 24, 2016, Libya's new Presidency Council announced it had received information that JEM was collaborating with Qaddafi loyalists to attack and disrupt oil facilities in southern Libya.¹⁴ Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) has repeatedly accused Khartoum of shipping arms and fighters to Islamist groups by air and by the overland route through Kufra.¹⁵

Ma'atan al-Sarra

Ma'atan al-Sarra Oasis is located in the Kufra district some 60 miles north of the border with Chad. Qaddafi used the remote and rarely visited oasis as a supply base for Sadiq al-Mahdi's 1976 attack on Khartoum. In the 1987 "Toyota War," Chadian forces (mostly Tubu) took Ma'atan al-Sarra in a devastating surprise attack.

Murzuq

Murzuq, the unofficial "headquarters" of the Fezzan Tubu, is 150 kilometers south of Sabha. Murzuq, like Ubari, lies on the southwest to northeast route that separates the Ubari and Murzuq sand seas. Murzuq is populated by a potentially volatile mix of Tuareg, Tubu, Arabs, and *al-Ahali* (black Libyans descended from slaves or economic migrants from the African interior), with each community ready to exploit or reject foreign intervention in light of their own interests.

The head of the Murzuq Military Council, Colonel Barka Wardougou, a Libyan Army veteran with experience in Chad and Lebanon and the former leader of a Tubu rebel group in Niger that joined Niger's 2007-2009 Tuareg rebellion, has demanded a more equitable distribution of Libya's oil wealth, threatening to form a federal state if this is not accomplished.¹⁶

Qatrunk

The road south from Murzuq runs through the oasis town of Qatrunk, where it splits to run 310 kilometers southwest to the border post with Niger at Tummo, and southeast toward Chad. When the border post at Tummo is closed, travelers from Niger must report to Libyan authorities in Qatrunk. The Tubu and Qaddadfa Arabs have a strong presence in the area.

Rabyanah Oasis and Sand Sea

On the western side of the southern route to Kufra is the inhospitable Rabyanah Sand Sea. Toward the eastern end of this feature is the Tubu-dominated Rabyanah Oasis, 130 kilometers west of Kufra, and the home district of several leading Tubu militia and political leaders as well as a Zuwaya minority. In the event of a foreign intervention, this region could provide a base for the development of new Tubu political factions.

Sabha

Sabha, 500 miles south of Tripoli, is the site of an important military base and airfield. The city of 210,000 people acts as a commercial and transportation hub for the region. During the Qaddafi era, the oasis was used for the development of rockets and nuclear weapons. Sabha is a tinderbox of rival ethnic/tribal communities, including the Arab Qaddadfa, their Awlad Sulayman rivals, Warfalla and Magraha Arabs, Tubu, and Tuareg. According to one Tubu leader, Sabha also serves as a local collection center for al-Qa'ida fighters from Mauritania, Libya, Algeria, and Tunisia.¹⁷ If foreign

extremists have already established a presence in Sabha, it would take very little to provoke new clashes that would further destabilize this important region.

The revolutionary Awlad Sulayman and the loyalist Qaddadfa confronted each other during the civil war despite a tribal alliance.¹⁸ The largest Awlad Sulayman militia seized Sabha's airport from a Hasawna Arab militia in September 2013.¹⁹ Clashes between the Tubu and members of the Arab Awlad Abu Seif and Awlad Sulayman tribes in March 2012 killed at least 100 people. By June the Tubu were clashing with the Libyan Shield Brigade that had been sent to restore order. The Tubu and the Awlad Sulayman set upon each other again in 2013 and 2014, while the Qaddadfa Arabs and the Awlad Sulayman clashed in 2012, 2013, and 2014.²⁰ By July 2015, the Sabha Tubu were involved in new clashes with both Tuareg and Qaddadfa and demanding the expulsion of Awlad Sulayman fighters from Sabha's Italian-era Elena castle (the former Fortezza Margherita).²¹

Tamenhint airbase, 30 kilometers northeast of Sabha, allowed Qaddafi to project air power into the Sahel and was an important operational base during the conflicts in Chad. The base was occupied by alleged "Qaddafiists" in January 2014 who were driven out by government airstrikes and Tubu ground forces, though fighting continued for several days north of Tamenhint.²²

Salvador Pass

The Salvador Pass lies at the north end of the Manguéni Plateau near the meeting point of Algeria, Niger, and Libya. Remote and unsupervised, the narrow mountain pass is used by well-armed traffickers and rebels to avoid the official crossing at Tummo.²³ Most notable of these is al-Murabitun leader Mokhtar Belmokhtar, who is believed to have used the Pass to flee from French-led forces in early 2013.²⁴ On the Libyan side, the Pass is nominally held by Tuareg militias that are often reduced to sending in reports of illegal crossings when they are outgunned. In mid-April 2015, the French 2e Régiment étranger de parachutistes (2e REP) met with a detachment of the Nigerien Army and consolidated control of the Pass.²⁵

Sarir

The Sarir oil fields (400 kilometers south of Ajdabiya) are among Libya's most productive and were the scene of heated struggles for control between Qaddafi loyalists and Tubu revolutionaries during the 2011 rebellion. There have since been repeated attacks on the Sarir power station and other facilities, the latest in mid-March 2016 when a suicide bomber and gunman believed to be affiliated with the Islamic State were killed by the Tubu 25th Brigade, affiliated with the Petroleum Facilities Guard (PFG). Other gunmen escaped after damaging power lines, pipelines, and Great Man-Made River facilities.²⁶ Clashes between Zuwaya gunmen and Tubu guards in 2013 and 2014 caused power shortages in Benghazi and Tripoli.²⁷

Hundreds of Tubu fighters from the 25th Brigade and others from the Desert Shield and Martyrs of Um Aranib militias in southwest Libya headed north to Benghazi to join the LNA in their campaign against Islamist groups in Benghazi in 2014.²⁸ Foreign intervention in Libya could compel these forces to return south to protect local interests with a subsequent reduction of experienced fighters available to combat extremist groups in the north.

Sharara

In the desert outside of Murzuq, 70 kilometers west of Ubari, is the Sharara oil field, Libya's largest. The area has been the scene of fighting between Tuareg and Tubu groups with production halted repeatedly by armed protesters seizing facilities to press various demands.²⁹ Al-Sharara and the neighboring al-Fil oil field are guarded by a Tubu-dominated detachment of the PFG that includes Zintanis and a number of Tuareg and Arabs. The PFG shut down al-Fil for a month over unpaid salaries in May-June 2014.³⁰

In November 2014, a Tuareg militia attacked Zintani members of the PFG, closing the field and depriving Libya of a third of its production. The Misratan 3rd Force operating out of Tamenhint Airbase joined forces with local Tuareg fighters and retook Sharara on November 7, 2014.³¹

Tazirbu

This group of 14 small oases, located roughly 250 kilometers northwest of Kufra, was formerly the seat of the Tubu Sultan, though the Zuwaya now dominate. Its importance today lies in the 120 wells just south of Tazirbu that pump aquifer water to Benghazi and Sirte through the GMR.

Tummo Pass

South of the Plateau du Manguéni is the Tummo Pass, the official but rarely attended border post between Niger and southwest Libya. In Niger, some 80 kilometers south of the Tummo Pass, French Legionnaires and Nigerien troops have set up a forward operating base and airstrip to conduct surveillance and interception operations at Fort Madama, a colonial-era French fort.³² Like the Salvador Pass, control of this crossing would be essential to prevent the entry or escape of extremist groups in the event of a foreign intervention, though the French presence has gone a long way to secure the Pass.

Ubari

A town of 40,000 people, Ubari is in the Targa valley, 200 kilometers west of Sabha. The Tuareg majority were generally cordial with the Arab and Tubu minorities until the arrival of a Libya Dawn-affiliated Tuareg militia from outside the area in 2014. Local Tuareg who had refused to join the group were nevertheless pulled into the fighting when the militia clashed with armed Tubu groups, splitting the town into two parts. After a year of fighting and hundreds of deaths, a peace agreement ended 14 months of conflict in November 2015, but sporadic clashes continue.³³

The latest of these involved bombardments by Tuareg occupying the Tendi Mountain high ground that damaged Tubu neighborhoods and Ubari's historic Ottoman castle (now used as a fort by Tubu fighters).³⁴

A former military compound in Ubari is used as a base for the Border Guards Brigade 315, an Islamist militia led by Tuareg Salafist scholar and former Ansar al-Din deputy commander Ahmad Omar al-Ansari who operates a religious school in a slum area of Ubari.³⁵ Brigade 315 serves simultaneously as a border guard and an alleged conduit for extremists crossing into Libya.³⁶

Al-Uwaynat

Al-Uwaynat is a mountain complex of 1,200 square kilometers situated at the meeting point of Libya, Egypt, and Sudan and is best

known for several small springs in the midst of an otherwise waterless desert. During the Libyan revolution, Sudan set up a military support base for the Libyan rebels at Uwaynat.³⁷ Today, the route has been revived for commercial traffic, smuggling, human trafficking, tourist expeditions, and the movement of armed groups. Sudan has long feared the entry of al-Qa`ida or Islamic State groups into the unstable Darfur region through this route and would almost certainly bring strong forces into the area to prevent the infiltration of radical Islamists seeking to escape a foreign military intervention in Libya.

Al-Wigh Air Force Base

Strategically located close to the borders with Niger, Chad, and Algeria, al-Wigh is currently held by the Tubu Um al-Aranib Martyrs' Brigade. In 2013, Prime Minister Ali Zidan rejected rumors al-Wigh was being used for French Special Forces operations or as a base for terrorist operations in Algeria.

Southern Libya's Borders

Libya's southern borders include those with Algeria (982 kilometers), Chad (1,055 kilometers), Sudan (383 kilometers), and Niger (354 kilometers). Most of the southern tribes have benefitted slightly, if at all from Libya's enormous oil wealth, leading to competition over the cross-border smuggling trade that often takes on ethnic or tribal overtones. Sudan and Libya created a joint border patrol in 2013, but Libya pulled out of the joint patrols in the summer of 2015.³⁸ In the absence of government authority, control of Libya's southern borders has been divided between Tubu and Tuareg militias. In the west, the Tuareg control the borders with Algeria and Niger as far as the Tummo border crossing; past that the borders with Niger, Chad, and Sudan are controlled by the Tubu as far as Jabal Uwaynat.³⁹

Whether Tuareg or Tubu, border patrols in the south are unfunded by Libyan authorities. As a consequence, the patrols claim to focus on "social evils," such as arms, narcotics, and militants, al-

lowing fuel, subsidized food, cigarettes, and illegal migrants to pass for a fee. Tubu patrols on the western border complain that they receive no response from government authorities when they report terrorist infiltrations, resulting in easy entry to Southern Libya for jihadist groups operating in the Sahel/Sahara region.⁴⁰

Conclusion

A limited deployment in northern Libya could easily trigger violence in southern Libya that would destabilize the nation as a whole through the uncontrolled infiltration of extremists through a region already notorious for a perilous combination of vital economic installations and a general absence of security. Foreign intervention in a region historically hostile to foreign rule and where the state is already regarded as weak and unsympathetic to local aspirations could also encourage southern separatism. Various groups in the south have pondered the possibility of independence, namely the Tubu centered around Kufra, the Tuareg in the southwestern border regions, and some Arab factions in the Fezzan, alarming Libya's southern and western neighbors where such movements have been active for decades.

A January Islamic State video statement threatened attacks on "al-Sarir, Jalu, and al-Kufra,"⁴¹ but religious extremism has so far played only a small role in southern Libya's political and ethnic violence. Porous borders present the possibility of Libya's south acting as a gateway for jihadis from the Sahara/Sahel to pour into Libya to confront a foreign intervention, while Islamic State fighters might move south from Sirte in the event of an intervention, either with the intention of attacking vital installations, connecting with other Islamist groups in Libya's southwest, or escaping into the Sahel.

Until the establishment of a representative unity government in Tripoli with the ability to deploy recognized national security units instead of ethnically or regionally based militias, vital southern oil and water infrastructure will present an enticing target for attacks by terrorists, rebels, or criminal organizations. **CTC**

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How Bangladesh Became Fertile Ground for al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State

By Animesh Roul

Despite government denials, Bangladesh has increasingly become fertile ground for al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State. Both groups have taken advantage of an upsurge in Islamist militancy in the country over anger at the execution of Islamist political leaders in 2013, and both hope to expand their footprint there by building alliances with local groups. Bangladeshi police suspect the Bangladeshi wing of al-Qa`ida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), which has claimed a series of attacks on secular bloggers, is liaising with top leadership of the terrorist network in Pakistan. An increasingly assertive, local chapter of the Islamic State has launched attacks on foreigners and sectarian targets in a bid to build its support base in the country. With radicalized Bangladeshis being drawn to both groups, the security climate is likely to worsen until the government acknowledges the threat.

Bangladesh, the fourth-largest Muslim majority country in the world, has been in the limelight of late because of growing political and religious violence, including increasingly frequent targeted killings of secularists by radical Islamists. Over the last three years the country has become increasingly polarized between moderate and secular-leaning forces on one side and Islamists on the other, which has resulted in growing radicalization and increasingly energized and strengthened local radical networks. While local dynamics explain much of the rise of violence, this article will document how both al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State are increasingly eyeing Bangladesh for expansion and taking advantage of local radical networks to

expand their presence and support base in the country.^a

Islamist Backlash

Fast-moving political, economic, and social changes, as well as settling of historical scores, have set off the current convulsions in Bangladesh. The current cycle of violence dates back to the Shahbagh protest movement in early 2013. This involved moderate and secular-leaning Bangladeshis demanding maximum punishment for Islamists accused of colluding with the Pakistani military junta to carry out massacres against nationalists during the 1971 War of Liberation^b and punitive action against the leaders of Bangladesh Jamaat-e Islami (also known as Jamaat or JeI), the largest politico-religious party in the country. They were particularly angered that Abdul Quader Mollah, a leading figure in the JeI and the so-called “butcher of Mirpur,” only received a life sentence. Following the protests, the Supreme Court sentenced him instead to death, and he was executed in December 2013 despite violent demonstrations from Islamists.¹

To counter the secular and progressive challenge, radical Islamists geared up for fierce retribution under the banner of Hefajat-e-Islam (protector of Islam) and demanded death for “atheists and apostates” as well as prohibitions against blasphemy and un-Islamic cultural practices. Much of their ire was directed against secular blog writers.

Fearing a complete secularization of the country by the Shahbagh movement, radicals demanded the reinsertion of the phrase “Absolute trust and faith in Allah” (a 1977 constitutional clause) into the constitution of Bangladesh and the introduction of a blasphemy law primarily targeting free-speech writers and bloggers whom the Islamists allege are denigrating Islam.

Within this troubled and polarized atmosphere, there has been a surge in Islamist militancy in the name of “defending Islam.” Well-entrenched but subdued Deobandi militant groups like Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and Harkat-ul-Jihad al Islami-Bangladesh (HuJI-B), both of which trace their lineage to

a Bangladesh was the focus of a January 2014 video message released by Ayman al-Zawahiri, “Bangladesh: Massacre Behind a Wall of Silence,” and was also featured in al-Qa`ida and Taliban English language magazines, Azan (issue 5, winter 2014) and Resurgence (fall 2014). The Islamic State’s Dabiq magazine featured articles on Bangladesh in issues 12 and 14.

b In early February 2013 protesters gathered in Dhaka’s Shahbagh Square to make clear their opposition to what they saw as lenient verdicts issued in war crimes trials relating to atrocities carried out by Islamists opposing separation from Pakistan in the 1971 liberation war as well as rising Islamic extremism in the country. This protest rally, which snowballed into a massive series of gatherings in the square that went on for almost a year, was led by online social media activists and free-speech bloggers under the banner of the Ganajagaran Mancha, a “mass-awakening forum,” demanding capital punishment for war crimes. For a detailed account, see Anika Hossain, “A Call To Rise,” *Star*, February 22, 2013.

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JeI, have become increasingly militant and energized. New groups have also emerged such as Ansar al-Islam, which has acted as the Bangladeshi wing of al-Qa`ida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), and Jund al-Tawheed wal Khilafah (JTK), whose loyalties lie with the Islamic State, making Bangladesh a new field of competition for the global jihadist powerhouses.

History of Islamist Extremism

The conducive atmosphere of Bangladesh for Islamist militancy has been broadly created by two historical factors: the country's political patronage of Islamism that nourished over a dozen extremist groups over the decades, and the rise and consolidation of the Deobandi-oriented JeI organization and its clamor for sharia-based governance in Bangladesh.

Ever since Bangladesh emerged as a nominally secularist state in 1971 after a war against Pakistan, the country has witnessed a sporadic, internal politico-religious tug-of-war. Even though the constitution emphasizes secularism as one of its four state principles and has banned the use of religion in politics, the clamor for a sharia-based Islamic state, ostensibly propounded by the JeI, has powerful backers in the country even today. The JeI has strong connections with a myriad of militant groups that have mushroomed throughout the country in recent decades under its patronage. These groups look at JeI as their spiritual and ideological fountainhead.

Two groups have been responsible for a significant share of the violence in Bangladesh. One of them, HuJI-B, was secretly founded in the late 1980s by the members of the Bangladeshi volunteer mujahideen who took part in the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan, where it developed strong operational connection with al-Qa`ida and Pakistani intelligence agencies. It has focused its attacks on the political leaders of the Awami League party (the secularist party that currently governs Bangladesh) as well as cultural events. Two particularly devastating attacks were a grenade attack on an Awami League rally in August 2004 that killed 24 and a bombing in Ramna Batamul in Dhaka during Bengali new year celebrations in April 2001 that killed 10.^{2 c}

An even more hardline group, Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) emerged in 1998, bringing attacks to a new level in the country.^d The group was responsible for a series of countrywide bombings in August 2005 as well as subsequent suicide attacks against government officials, including judges, lawyers, and pro-

fessors.^e Both HuJI-B and JMB have been aiming to establish an Islamic state through the political process as well as resorting to violence.

There was a half-decade respite from Islamist-related violence after a crackdown on Islamist groups after the military intervened in January 2007 to impose a caretaker government and during the Sheikh Hasina-led Awami government which came to power in elections the following year. In March 2007 authorities executed several senior JMB leaders, including its paramount commander Sheikh Abdur Rahman and senior commander Siddiqul Islam (alias Bangla Bhai).^f This coincided with multiple arrests of both HuJI-B and JMB rank-and-file members in the country, more aggressive policing, and the blanket proscription on many Islamist groups. But the period of relative calm ended with the Islamist backlash against secularists in 2013, unleashing violence onto Bangladesh's streets.

HuJI-B and JMB have both reemerged in new forms since the surge in Islamist militancy in 2013, and intelligence suggests they are now working together to some degree.^g HuJI-B's latest known offshoot is Tanjim-e-Tamiruddin (TeT).^f In October 2013 one of its leaders, Khalilur Rahman, was arrested in Dhaka along with his followers after investigations revealed they were trying to reorganize the network.^g That same month, security forces seized a large cache of arms and ammunitions from TeT members. Investigations have yet to reveal fully its spread and strength.⁵

JMB's new incarnation is BEM. Following the trial and execution of its top leadership in 2007, the group was thrown into complete disarray with its remaining commanders making sporadic attempts to revive its armed campaign. BEM came into the limelight after security forces arrested several militants in the town of Bogra in August 2013.⁶ There is little further detail available on the group making it difficult to assess its strength.

A number of TeT and BEM members have made clear their support of JeI and Hefajat-e Islam (defenders of Islam), an umbrella group of pro-Islamic groups. Interestingly, symbiotic ties between HuJI-B and JMB also surfaced during mid-2013 when Masiur Rahman Milon, a one-time JMB militant arrested in Jhalakathi

e JMB was behind synchronised bombings across around 50 towns and cities in Bangladesh in August 2005. In October and November 2005, the law courts and judges were targeted in another series of bomb blasts in Chandpur, Chittagong, Sylhet, and Lakshmipur. Two High court judges were killed and three others were injured in the suicide bomb attack in Jhalakathi on November 14, 2005. Earlier in February 2004, JMB militants attacked professor Humayun Azad near Ekushey Book Fair, leaving him seriously injured. For background on JMB, see Animesh Roul, "Jamaatul Mujahidin Bangladesh: Weakened, But Not Destroyed," *CTC Sentinel* 4:11-12 (2011): pp. 16-18. For more on JMB's attacks, see "Bombs Explode Across Bangladesh," BBC, August 17, 2005; "Nine Die in Bangladesh Bombings," BBC, November 25, 2005.

f HuJI-B had created several offshoots including Islami Dawat-e-Kafala (IDeK) and Islami Gan Andolon-Bangladesh (IGA-B) to avoid scrutiny. Following the government proscription in October 2005 for its anti-state activities, it again morphed into Islami Gan Andolon (dropping Bangladesh from its earlier incarnation IGA-B) and Sachetan Islami Janata (Conscious Islamic People).

g The reboot attempt was carried under the guise of a "Quran Learning Course." To whip up support, HuJI-B cadres circulated a book, *Takbiatul Iman*, which alleged Muslims in Bangladesh were being tortured, assaulted, and killed under the Sheikh Hasina government. See Animesh Roul, "Al-Qaeda Leader al-Zawahiri Urges Jihad Against the 'Anti-Islamic' Government of Bangladesh," Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor, Volume 12 Issue 2, January 2014.

c Other bomb attacks and assassination plots carried out by HuJI-B include the March 1999 bomb attack at the cultural program of Udichi Shilpi Goshthi in Jessore, an assassination attempt on then Prime Minister and Awami League leader Sheikh Hasina in July 2000 at Kotalipara in Gopalganj, and a bomb attack on a political rally at Paltan Maidan in January 2001. See "Huji boss captured: Sheikh Farid accused of Ramna Batamul carnage, other deadly attack," *Daily Star*, April 28, 2011; "Mufti Hannan indicted for grenade attack on CPB rally," *BDNews24.com*, September 4, 2014.

d The most infamous slogan of HuJI-B, "Amra Sobai Hobo Taliban, Bangla Hobe Afghanistan" (we all become Taliban, and Bangladesh will turn to Afghanistan), was used by JMB. Alex Perry, "Deadly Cargo - Bangladesh has become a safe haven for al-Qa`ida," *Time*, October 21, 2002.

along with other HuJI operatives, confessed to attempting to re-organize HuJI-B.⁷ In December 2015 a previously unknown JMB splinter group, "Al Mujahed of Bangladesh," came to light when six of its operatives were arrested in Dhaka's Motijheel area while planning to assassinate a Sufi pir (spiritual master).⁸

Drumbeat of Terror

The last three years have seen over 30 machete attacks, shootouts, and bombings in Bangladesh in a renewed surge of Islamist violence that has often been directed against critics of religious fanaticism, including U.S.-based Bangladeshi intellectual Avijit Roy who was hacked to death while visiting a Dhaka book fair in February 2015. Pinpointing who is responsible for this violence has been difficult because of a lack of government transparency about its investigations and its tendency to reflexively blame domestic groups like HuJI-B and JMB or the JeI movement and its student wing Islami Chaatra Sibir, despite the fact that nearly all the attacks have been claimed by the Bangladeshi affiliates and allies of al-Qa`ida or the Islamic State.^h

While groups affiliated with al-Qa`ida have targeted activists from the Ganajagarana Mancha (People's Resurgence Platform), which led the Shahbagh protests in 2013, and bloggers campaigning for secularism or critical of religion, militants affiliated with and allied to the Islamic State have targeted foreign nationals, minorities, and even security forces.

Critics of the Bangladeshi government accuse it of blaming domestic groups to downplay the transnational jihadist threat to the country, deflect criticisms it is not doing enough to combat the extremist threat, and tarnish its Islamist political opponents. The lack of government transparency has made it difficult to assess the degree to which HuJI-B and JMB and its new incarnations and their followers have overlap with groups acting on behalf of al-Qa`i`da and the Islamic State in Bangladesh, but Bangladeshi police officials interviewed by the author say there are strong indications a significant number of followers of JMB, historically the most violent jihadi group in Bangladesh, have gravitated toward the Islamic State and are acting in its name. HuJI-B, whose ties to al-Qa`ida core date back to the Afghanistan War, has seen their operatives gravitate toward AQIS.⁹

Al-Qa`ida's Bangladesh Venture

A pro-al-Qa`ida-linked grouping calling itself Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT),¹⁰ which in reaction to government bans has also operated under the name of Ansar al-Islam and Ansar al Islam Bangladesh-2,ⁱ has been responsible for a significant proportion of recent attacks in Bangladesh.¹¹ It claims to operate now as the Bangladeshi

wing of AQIS.^j Some academics¹² are skeptical of the notion that al-Qa`ida has an organized presence in Bangladesh, but there is mounting evidence that ABT's affiliation with al-Qa`ida is beyond name-only. Although much remains unknown about the nature of its ties and contacts with the senior leadership of Ayman al-Zawahiri's terror network domiciled in and around the tribal areas of Pakistan, there are indications, as will be outlined in this article, of coordination between the groups.

ABT emerged in 2013 as a mostly online network with much of its early membership made up of students at North-South University in Dhaka. As one of its alternative names suggests, the group was modeled on Iraqi salafi-jihadi group Ansar al-Islam. Its key inspirational figure was the firebrand spiritual leader Mufti Jasimuddin Rahmani, who openly supported both al-Qa`ida and the Taliban. He and his followers were also particularly inspired by the teachings of American AQAP (al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula) cleric Anwar al-Awlaki.¹³ Rahmani incited jihad in Bangladesh through online blogs and other social media platforms like YouTube and Facebook.^k

Rahmani's incendiary Friday sermons and speeches at madrasas inspired many ABT activists, mostly former Chhatra Shibir cadres, to attack secular bloggers and activists working under the banner of Ganajagarana Mancha. At his Friday sermons at a mosque in Dhaka, Rahmani spoke of a duty to kill anyone who was against Islam and the Prophet. In his writings Rahmani listed progressive intellectuals such as Ahmed Rajib Haider, Asif Mohiuddin, Daud Haider, Taslima Nasrin, and Ibrahim Khalil as people who should be persecuted because they defamed Islam.¹⁴

In February 2013 ABT militants inspired by Rahmani's sermons hacked to death the secular blogger Ahmed Rajib Haider.¹⁵ Rahmani's followers also attacked but failed to kill three other bloggers involved in the Shahbagh movement that year. Asif Mohiuddin survived an attack near Uttara locality in Dhaka in January¹⁶ and Sanaur Rahaman was injured by machete-wielding militants in early March in the Mirpur area.¹⁷ In August 2013 another Ganajagarana Mancha activist, blogger Tonmoy Ahmed Moon, was also knifed in Kashiabari area in Gaibandha district.¹⁸

Rahmani was arrested in August 2013 and subsequently given a five-year prison sentence in connection with the killings and attempted killings.¹⁹ Around this time, likely in response to the crackdown, ABT started to refer to itself as Ansar al-Islam in social media pronouncements.

At the beginning of 2014 al-Qa`ida maneuvered to take advantage of the rising Islamist anger in Bangladesh. It had had a long history of engagement with Bangladesh-based Islamist groups and had enjoyed considerable support since at least the late 1990s within the myriad radical and militant communities in Bangla-

^h According to a tally by SITE Intelligence Group, as of late April 2016 AQIS-aligned groups have taken responsibility for 13 attacks since 2013, killing 11 and wounding five, and the Islamic State has claimed 15 attacks since it took responsibility for shooting dead Italian aid worker Cesare Tavella in September 2015. See "Special Report: Terror Rising in Bangladesh," SITE Intelligence Group, April 26, 2016.

ⁱ The attacks, modus operandi, and investigating reports indicate these groups are all vehicles for the same set of killers. The names of the groups were posted in claims of responsibility for the attacks on social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook.

^j One sign that Ansar al-Islam has found favor with al-Qa`ida is ABT's online presence on the al-Qa`ida-affiliated Ansar al-Mujahideen English language forum and other similar al-Qa`ida-linked jihadist forums like Qital Tube and Bab-ul-Islam. For instance, ABT used these forums for posting propaganda material in regional or local language like Urdu and Bengali.

^k Rahmani and his followers spread their online propaganda in three different languages, Bengali, Urdu, and Arabic, via web forums like Mujahideen Media, QitalTube, and Ansar1.info. See "Ansarullah BT deeply rooted in Al-Qaeda ideology," *Daily Observer*, November 7, 2014; "Ansarullah Bangla Team: Preaching militancy, building network," *Daily Star*, August 14, 2013.

desh, especially from the Soviet-Afghan war returnees.¹ In a January 2014 video titled “Bangladesh: Massacre Behind a Wall of Silence,”²⁰ al-Qa`ida’s leader Ayman al-Zawahiri urged Bangladeshis to foment a popular uprising to “confront the crusader onslaught against Islam.” The video dwelt on alleged atrocities committed by the security forces against pro-Islamic protesters and called for a sharia-based emirate in Bangladesh. Al-Zawahiri urged Islamic scholars and clerics of Bangladesh to lead the protesters from the front, telling them to teach Bangladeshis how to defend Islam and to instill in them a love for martyrdom.

Al-Qa`ida’s two-pronged strategy of “Jihad and Dawa” for Bangladesh seems to have invigorated Ansar al-Islam, despite the imprisonment of its spiritual leader, Rahmani. In March 2014 two teenage bloggers, Mahbubur Rahman Raihan and Ullash Das, were attacked near their alma mater, Chittagong College.²¹ In mid-November that year militants belonging to Ansar al Islam Bangladesh-2 (another front for ABT) claimed the murder of Shaiful Islam, a sociology professor in Rajshai University, for his opposition to the practice of women wearing the burkha (full veil) in educational institutions.²² He had been on the “hit list of targets” released earlier by Ansar al-Islam.²³

Ansar al-Islam received a further boost when al-Qa`ida established AQIS in September 2014 to wage jihad across south Asia. AQIS has encouraged attacks in Bangladesh through its online English-language publication Resurgence, which has vividly detailed alleged atrocities against Muslims in Bangladesh and urged a revolt against the democratically elected government by invoking Haji Shariatullah’s Faraizi movement, an Islamic revivalist movement of the 19th century.²⁴

Ansar al-Islam began referring to itself as the Bangladeshi wing

“At the beginning of 2014 al-Qa`ida maneuvered to take advantage of the rising Islamist anger in Bangladesh. It has had a long history of engagement with Bangladesh-based Islamist groups.”

of AQIS from mid-2015 onward.²⁵ Even before then, the satellite group and the global jihadist powerhouse had launched strikingly similar messaging campaigns, with Resurgence championing the killings of secular bloggers in Bangladesh.²⁶

Bangladeshi police officials told the author they suspect Ansar al-Islam is communicating with the top leadership of AQIS in Pakistan.²⁷ There are several further indications Ansar al-Islam has developed organizational links to AQIS. Last month Bangladeshi media reported that recent raids on the group in Bangladesh revealed a former JMB operative, Ejaz Hossani (aka Sajjad), had acted as a point man between Ansar al-Islam and AQIS after fleeing Bangladesh and becoming an AQIS commander in Karachi.²⁸ Hossani was reportedly killed in a Karachi shootout in January 2015.²⁹ Other Bangladeshis have also climbed up the AQIS hierarchy, notably an operative called Suleiman (aka Ashiqur Rahman) who was killed in a drone strike in Pakistan.³⁰

Encouraged by government inaction against the killers of the bloggers and al-Qa`ida’s pronouncements, Ansar al-Islam militants upped the ante in 2015, killing and maiming half a dozen secular and free-speech activists. Among them was Avijit Roy, a U.S.-based Bangladeshi scientist and blogger who wrote for the Mukto Mano (Free Mind) blog and was hacked to death as he left a book fair in Dhaka that February.³¹ Three other secular bloggers—Washiqur Rehman Babu,³² Ananta Bijoy Das,³³ and Niloy Chetterjee³⁴—were killed later that year, as were publisher Faisal Arifin Dipan³⁵ and journalist Mashru Rahman Utsho.³⁶ In all these killings the same tactic of multiple stabbings with sharp-edged weapons were used.

In May 2015, AQIS chief Aasim Umar exhorted further killings of atheist bloggers in Bangladesh in a video release entitled “From France to Bangladesh: The Dust Will Never Settle Down.”³⁷ In July 2015, Bangladeshi police arrested two jihadist operatives described as heading the Bangladeshi chapter of AQIS—the alleged chief coordinator of the group Mufti Mainul Islam, a former HuJI-B operative, and his alleged advisor Maulana Zafar Amin. Little informa-

p Suleiman was mentioned by AQIS leader Maulana Aasim Umar in the video release “From France to Bangladesh: The Dust Will Never Settle Down,” As-Sahab Media, archived on Jihadology.net on May 2, 2015.

q Dipan’s Jagriti Prakasan publishing house in Dhaka was subsequently mentioned in the al-Qa`ida and ABT Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF) Bengali wing video entitled “From Charlie Hebdo to Jagriti,” (February 9, 2016). This video profiled 12 individuals attacked in Bangladesh so far. See “GIMF Bangla Team Video Celebrates Past Attacks on ‘Islam-Hating’ Writers,” SITE Intelligence Group, February 9, 2016.

r He also called for more such attacks in Pakistan. See Maulana Aasim Umar, “From France to Bangladesh: The Dust Will Never Settle Down,” As Sahab Media, May 2015, archived on Jihadology.net on May 2, 2015.

l Fazlul Rahman of the Jihad Movement of Bangladesh was one of the original signatories of the *fatwa* issued by Usama bin Ladin in February 1998 urging action against the United States. Also Harkat ul Jihad Islami-Bangladesh leaders have endorsed bin Ladin’s ideals. Also there were unconfirmed reports of al-Qa`ida militants arriving in Chittagong port (the infamous M.V. Mecca saga) in 2002. For more on al-Qa`ida’s early footprints, see Bertil Lintner, “Bangladesh: A Cocoon of Terror,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, April 4, 2002; Perry.

m Asif Mohiuddin, Raihan, and Das survived the attacks but were later arrested and jailed for insulting Islam and Prophet Mohammad in their respective writings in social media pages and blogs. See “Blogger Asif Mohiuddin held,” *Daily Star*, April 3, 2013. For more on Raihan and Das’ arrest for their blog content, see “Two bloggers sent to jail,” *Dhaka Tribune*, March 31, 2014.

n On social media Ansar al Islam Bangladesh-2 declared, “Our Mujahideens [fighters] executed a ‘Murtad’ [apostate] today in Rajshahi who had prohibited female students in his department to wear ‘Burka’ [veil].” The website also quoted a 2010 article from a newspaper affiliated with Jamaat-e-Islami, which stated that “Professor Shaiful Islam, while being the chair of the sociology department, recruited teachers on condition of being clean-shaved and not wearing kurta-pajamas. He barred female students from wearing burka in classes. This led to many students abandoning burka against their will.” See “Islamist group claim responsibility of RU teacher murder,” BDNews24.com, November 16, 2014.

o One article in Resurgence stated, “No matter how harsh it sounds, a rebellion against this oppressive system is what the land of Haji Shariatullah needs these days. And as we do so, let us also revive the spirit of the Faraizi movement and return to our true roots. A revival of Islam in our individual and collective lives should be our answer to those who seek to stamp out Islam from Muslim Bangladesh.” Sulaiman Ahmed, “Bangladesh at the Cross Roads,” Resurgence (As Sahab Media, Subcontinent), summer 2014, pp. 79-81.

tion has surfaced since on how they ran the group or the nature of their ties to AQIS leaders overseas.³²

The targeted killings by pro al-Qa`ida militants continued in 2016. For example, on April 6, Nazimuddin Samad, a blogger and activist of Ganajagaran Mancha, was killed in the Sutrapur area in Dhaka. As usual, Ansar al-Islam, the purported Bangladesh division of AQIS, claimed credit for the murder.³³ On April 25 Xulhaz Mannan, the senior editor of Bangladesh's first LGBT magazine *Roopbaan*, and Samir Mahbub Tonoy, a fellow gay rights activist, were killed by militants. Again Ansar al-Islam took responsibility in a detailed statement, saying they were killed as "they had been working relentlessly to spread & popularize the perversion of homosexuality in Bangladesh ... [and both] were soldiers working for America."³⁴

Claims of responsibility have taken a variety of forms. Starting in August 2015 many were in the form of releases by Ansar al-Islam in Bangladesh.³⁵ Claims have also been made by small units of hitmen at different social media handles; for example, Twitter handle "Ansar Bangla-7" claimed Roy's killing,³⁶ while "Ansar Bangla 8" claimed the killing of Das³⁷ and "Ansar al Islam 4" claimed responsibility for publisher Dipan's murder.³⁸

Following Nazimuddin Samad's death, Ansar al Islam spokesperson Mufti Abdullah Ashraf, a mysterious figure who is still at large, indicated that the organization would continue to target people who commit eight specific kinds of offenses against what they regard as true Islam.³⁹ The current leader of the group has not been publicly revealed.

Enter the Islamic State

Amid these increasingly violent activities by AQIS and Ansar al Islam, the competing Islamic State sensed an opportunity to establish a footprint in Bangladesh as part of an expansion campaign in the Indian Subcontinent. Coinciding with the announcement of the caliphate in Syria and Iraq, a group of unidentified Bangladeshi nationals pledged allegiance (*bay`a*) to the Islamic State in August 2014 and vowed to organize Bengali Muslims under the leadership of Islamic State chief Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.⁴⁰

Within a relatively short span of time, the Islamic State's violent ideals have found traction in Bangladesh due to the Islamic State's robust propaganda tools and through an already radicalized Bengali diaspora. This vulnerability became apparent when a large number of Bengali-origin British nationals traveled to join the Islamic State

on the Syrian and Iraqi battlefields.⁴¹ For example, in September 2014 a British citizen of Bangladeshi origin, Samiun Rahman, was arrested in Dhaka for recruiting for the Islamic State.⁴⁰^v A series of arrests of suspected Islamic State recruiters and militants followed, mostly affiliated with the banned JMB, thereby sending a strong and clear signal the Islamic State had arrived.^w

The Islamic State has found support within the rank-and-file of JMB⁴¹ and has returned the favor by eulogizing JMB's slain leaders in its magazine *Dabiq* in a bid for additional support.^x In contrast, it should be noted that the Islamic State has been sharply critical of Bangladesh's political Islamist movement, JeI, because of its alleged moderation and embrace of democracy.⁴²

While Ansar al Islam's targeted violence against progressive secular culture and alleged "anti-Islam" activities in the country continued unabated, the Islamic State's wave of violence started in 2015 and has seen attacks on Shi`a, foreigners, and places of worship claimed by self-professed Islamic State fighters in Bangladesh. The attacks have been in line with the Islamic State's core ideals that espouse sectarianism, including anti-Shi`a or anti-Ahmadi sentiments, and have often involved gun or bomb attacks in contrast to al-Qa`ida's use of machetes and knives.

A lack of government transparency and its apparent reluctance to acknowledge the growing Islamic State influence in Bangladesh has made it difficult to ascertain who exactly carried out the attacks on Shi`a, foreigners, and places of worship, but it is possible some of the attacks were the work of Jund al-Tawheed wal Khilafah (JTK).⁴³ Although not much is known about the group, it is believed to have recruited a number of Bangladeshi nationals to fight in Syria. In late May 2015 Bangladeshi police arrested JTK operatives Aminul Islam Beg, a former JMB member who had allegedly selected 20 JMB members to travel to Syria and join the Islamic State.⁴⁴

In October 2014 suspected JTK members pledged support to al-Baghdadi in a video message, urging Bangladeshi Muslims to participate in armed jihad and to contribute financially toward the cause.⁴⁵ It could be possible that the JTK is the same "Khilafah's soldiers in Bengal" (also translated as the Soldiers of the Caliphate in Bangladesh), mentioned in the Islamic State's *Dabiq* magazine as being behind attacks on behalf of the Islamic State in the country.⁴⁶

^u For instance, there was the October 2013 incident involving five Portsmouth, U.K.-based youths of Bangladeshi origin ("Britani Brigade Bangladeshi Bad Boys") who traveled to join the Islamic State in Syria and subsequently were killed in battle. "Fourth 'British Bangladeshi' jihadist killed," *Daily Star/Independent*, October 26, 2014.

^v It is not clear how many Bangladeshis have joined the Islamic State in Syria, but there were only three Bangladeshi residents among the 4,600 unique Islamic State personnel records recovered from Syria dating from early 2013 to late 2014. See Brian Dodwell, Daniel Milton, and Don Rassler, "The Caliphate's Global Workforce: An Inside Look at the Islamic State's Foreign Fighter Paper Trail," Combating Terrorism Center, April 2016.

^w Over 15 suspected Islamic State recruiters and sympathizers were arrested between September 2014 and October 2015, including Hifzur Rahman, a JMB militant and the Islamic State's Dhaka unit leader, and Abdullah Al Galib, organizer of the Islamic State-linked Jund At-Tawheed Wal Khilafah. "15 IS suspects held in 1 year," *Daily Star*, October 8, 2015.

^x *Dabiq* magazine has eulogized JMB and its slain leaders for attempting "to awaken the Muslim masses of Bengal to the importance of ruling by Shariah and the fundamentals of Al-wala' wa-l-bara' (loyalty and disavowal)." See Abu Abdur Rahamn al Bangali, "The Revival of Jihad In Bengal" With the Spread of the light of the Khilafa," *Dabiq*, issue 12, pp. 38-41.

^s On an earlier occasion, AQIS's leader Aasim Umar also claimed responsibility for the deaths of Bangladeshi bloggers and a professor in a video released on May 2, 2015. "Watch video of Al-Qaeda claiming responsibility for Bangladeshi killings," *Dhaka Tribune*, May 3, 2015. Either to confuse investigators or due to larger organizational restructuring, ABT in mid-August 2015 issued a statement in al-Qa`ida-linked jihadist media effort the Global Islamic Media Front (merged to form GIMF Bangla Team in December 2015) that ABT was a media platform and not engaged in militant operations, while congratulating Ansar al-Islam, Bangladesh, and AQIS for killing atheist bloggers, including Niloy Neel in August 2015. See "The Global Islamic Media Front presents a new statement from Ansar Allah Bangla Team: Refuting News About the Role of Ansar Allah Bangla Team in the Assassination of the Blasphemer Blogger Niloy Chowdhury Neel in Bangladesh," *Jihadology.net*, August 19, 2015.

^t The first-ever video pledge, titled "Muslims in Bangladesh Give Bayah to the Caliph," was published on August 2, 2014, and was available on YouTube for some time. See "ISIS in Bangladesh?" *Dhaka Tribune*, August 7, 2014.

On September 28, 2015 the Islamic State claimed its first attack in Bangladesh, saying two gunmen belonging to the “Soldiers of the Caliphate in Bangladesh” shot dead the Italian aid worker Cesare Tavella in Dhaka.⁴⁷ On October 3 it also claimed the same group had shot dead Japanese national Hoshi Kunio in Rangpur district.⁴⁸

Between October and December 2015 a series of attacks on sectarian and religious targets rocked Bangladesh. Pro-Islamic State militants targeted the famous Shi`a mosque Hussaini Dalan in Dhaka, a Shi`a mosque in Bogra,⁴⁹ and the Chokpara Ahmadiyya Jamaat Mosque in Bagmara via a suicide strike.⁵⁰ The Islamic State took responsibility for the attacks on the Shi`a and Ahmadiyya mosques, in some cases providing granular detail and naming the perpetrators.⁵⁰

Further Islamic State-inspired violent incidents in this three-month period included an attempt by Islamic State inspired militants on the life of Pastor Luke Sarker at the Faith Bible Church on October 12, 2015; the November 19, 2015, attempt by gunmen to kill Piero Parolari, an Italian doctor and pastor; and a December 6, 2015, attack on a Hindu temple (Kantaji Mandir) in Dinajpur. Bangladesh authorities blamed JMB for these targeted attacks against Hindus, Buddhists and Christians, and denied transnational jihadi groups had any role in these attacks. As mentioned above, it is highly likely remnants of JMB have taken up the Islamic State cause in Bangladesh.^{51 z}

In November 2015 the Islamic State announced it had nominated a leader to take control of operations in Bangladesh, intensifying efforts to portray itself as present on the ground in the country.^{52 a}

The Islamic State claimed attacks have increased this year, including the targeted killings of Rezaul Karim Siddiquee, an English language professor;⁵² Nikhil Joardar, a Hindu tailor;⁵³ Hossain Ali, a freedom fighter and converted Christian;⁵⁴ Abdul Razzaq,⁵⁵ Chamir Uddin Mandal,⁵⁶ and Sanwar Hossain,⁵⁷ homoeopathic med-



Purported members of Bangladeshi group Soldiers of the Khilafah (DABIQ)

icine practitioners; and Jorgeswar Das Adhikari,⁵⁸ a Hindu priest.

Even though it is not clear if the Islamic State has any direct command and control of operations inside Bangladesh, and the degree of communication between Raqqa and Dhaka is unclear, it is certainly relying on the local militants to carry out attacks, and working aggressively to brand them as Islamic State operations.

Islamic State media units have waged an all-out propaganda campaign directed at Bangladesh, for example issuing a call in Dabiq magazine for “Muslims in Bengal to support the Khilafah and close their ranks, unite under the soldiers of the Khilafah in Bengal, and aid them in every possible way.”⁵⁹ Islamic State media units are also churning out jihadist nasheeds that exhort jihad and the caliphate in the Bengali language.⁶⁰

Recent issues of Dabiq magazine^{61 ab} make claims about both a significant Bangladeshi presence within the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq and a growing Islamic State presence in Bangladesh, in the form of the group calling itself the Caliphate’s Soldiers in Bangladesh. The most recent issue of Dabiq, posted in mid-April, included a eulogy to slain Bangladeshi fighter Abu Jundal al-Banghali (aka Ashequr Rahman),^{62 c} who died in a battle at Raqqa, Syria, that aimed to entice more volunteers from Bangladesh.⁶²

The same issue of Dabiq revealed the identity of the emir of the Islamic State Bangladesh chapter. The interview with the man in question, Sheikh Abu Ibrahim al-Hanif, who was not pictured, provides interesting details on the group’s own view of its expansion in Bangladesh, though some of its claims are obviously self-serving. Al-Hanif claims the group has recruited a growing number of Bangladeshis, including followers of the JeI political movement.^{ad} He also calls Bengal (Bangladesh and parts of modern India) an important region for the caliphate and a launching pad for jihad

y Bangladesh experienced its first sectarian violence on October 24, 2015, when Islamist militants targeted a famous Shi`a Imambarha, Hussaini Dalan, located in the old city of Dhaka, killing a minor. The serial blasts at the Dalan left over 80 Shi`a worshippers injured. Almost a month later, the Bogra Shi`a Mosque was attacked by gunmen on November 27 who killed the mosque’s muezzin (a prominent religious official of a mosque who calls for prayer and other rituals). On December 25 a suicide bomber attacked the Chokpara Ahmadiyya Jamaat Mosque in Bagmara (Rajshahi), injuring a couple of people present at the site. See “Triple explosions at Shia gathering in Old Dhaka leave one killed, nearly 80 wounded.” BDNews24.com, October 24, 2015; “IS claims credit for Bogra Shia mosque attack: SITE.” Daily Star, November 27, 2015; and “IS claims first ‘suicide bomb’ attack in Bangladesh,” Dhaka Tribune, December 25, 2015.

z Other victims of Islamic State-inspired strikes have been people of Sufi orientation (pirs) targeted for their allegedly “deviant” religious practices. At least four Sufi pirs were killed between September 2015 and May 2016—Salahuddin Khan, Khijir Khan, Rahmatullah, and Shahidullah. It should be noted that attacks on Sufi pirs are not new in Bangladesh. In December 2013 suspected JMB militants decapitated six people, including a Sufi pir and his followers in Dhaka’s Gopibagh locality for their alleged anti-Islamic activities. “JMB leader Mithu ‘confesses’ to 2013 murders of six in Gopibagh,” BDNews 24.com, November 28, 2015.

aa An article in the 12th issue of Dabiq stated that “the soldiers of the Khilafah in Bengal pledged their allegiance to the Khalifah Ibrahim, united their ranks, nominated a regional leader, gathered behind him, dissolved their former factions, performed the necessary military preparations, and hastened to answer the order from the Islamic State leadership, by targeting the crusaders and their allies wherever they may be found.” Dabiq, issue 12, p. 41.

ab Issue 14 of Dabiq also listed the military strikes of the Islamic State inside Bangladesh along with substantial coverage of its activities. See “Among the Believers of Men, Abu Jundal al-Banghali,” Dabiq, issue 14, pp. 50-51, and “With the Amir of the Khilafah’s Soldiers In Bengal: Shaykh Abu Ibrahim Al-Hanif,” Dabiq, issue 14, pp. 58-66.

ac Ashequr Rahman was a student at Dhaka’s Military Institute of Science and Technology (MIST) who left Dhaka on February 21 of last year to attend a conference in Turkey.

ad While al-Hanif blamed the Buddhists in Myanmar for the minority Muslims’ plight, he heavily criticized the “cow-worshipping” Hindus for creating “anti-Islamic propaganda” in both mainstream and social media. See “Interview with the Amir of the Khilafah’s Soldiers In Bengal: Shaykh Abu Ibrahim Al-Hanif,” Dabiq, issue 14, pp. 58-66.

in neighboring India and Myanmar. Additionally, al-Hanif reveals an impending alliance between the Caliphate's Soldiers in Bangladesh and the Islamic State Wilayat Khurasan, led by former Taliban leader Hafiz Saeed Khan and located in Afghanistan and Pakistan. This suggests the Islamic State is attempting to create its own south Asian venture to compete with AQIS.

In a strategy similar to its targeting of Shi'a in the Middle East to create advantageous sectarian tensions, al-Hanif also indicated that the Islamic State's wing in Bangladesh would target the country's minority Hindu population, which it accuses of controlling key levers of power. "Shariah in Bengal won't be achieved until the local Hindus are targeted in mass numbers and until a state of polarization is created in the region, dividing between the believers and the disbelievers," he stated.^{63 ae}

The arrest of eight men of Bangladeshi origin in Singapore in early May⁶⁴ underscored the security challenges facing Bangladesh.⁶⁵ Police investigations revealed they had formed a group called the Islamic State in Bangladesh (ISB) and had been planning to stage terror attacks in Bangladesh.⁶⁶ In January Singapore deported 26 expatriate Bangladeshis who followed the teachings

of al-Awlaki and were suspected of supporting the ideology of both al-Qa'ida and the Islamic State.⁶⁷

The fact that those deported from Singapore in January appear to have supported both al-Qa'ida and the Islamic State suggests there are fewer hard boundaries between supporters of the two competing global jihadist groups than in some other regions of the world. Anecdotal evidence suggests many Bangladeshi Islamist extremists are supportive of both groups. A case in point appears to be Abdullah al Galib, a self-professed, one-time member of ABT who was arrested in May 2015 as he allegedly plotted attacks in Bangladesh on behalf of JTK and the Islamic State. Literature on both al-Qa'ida and the Islamic State was found in his residence.⁶⁸

Conclusion

Islamist terrorism is on the rise in Bangladesh, fueled by militant groups taking advantage of the country's version of the "culture wars." With tens of thousands of Islamists angered by what they see as a secular war on Islam and with al-Qa'ida and the Islamic State maneuvering to exploit the ferment, the threat picture is darkening, especially because Bangladesh's government has not acknowledged the presence of transnational groups.

Although al-Qa'ida and the Islamic State have existing ideological rivalries and are competing for dominance in the jihadist landscape elsewhere, this paradigm does not hold as strongly in Bangladesh. Islamist extremists and other militants are not greatly differentiating between AQIS or the Islamic State as of now.

According to anecdotal evidence, there are al-Qa'ida loyalists, comprised of Afghan war returnees and supporters of Usama bin Ladin, who are seemingly convinced about the AQIS agenda and who have also been praising al-Baghdadi for his courage and charisma, as well as his establishment of the caliphate. Alarmingly, this means that efforts by al-Qa'ida and the Islamic State to make Bangladesh the newest front of global jihad are creating a resonant jihadist wave that is energizing local groups to act. **CTC**

ae Islamic State-linked fighters have also threatened Christian priests. One such threat came in the form of a letter addressed to Reverend Barnabas Hemrom, priest of Rangpur Baptist Church Sangha, dated November 25, that contained a list of 10 priests of other Baptist churches in the district. The letter stated, "You will be killed any day or any moment. Eat whatever you want." Written in Bengali language, the three letters purportedly from an Islamic State-linked group was received by a Baptist Reverend on March 24, 2016, in Rangpur, Bangladesh. An unverified Instagram translation reads, "The director of ISIS needs five heads of Christian missionaries from Rangpur. The beheaded heads will send to Syria as a gift ... these heads will be collected after festival of 25th December." See "10 priests in Rangpur of Bangladesh get death threat," *Daily Star*, November 27, 2015, and Instagram handle of Alison Joyce, a photojournalist based in Mumbai and Dhaka, @allisonsarahjoyce.

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